The Book of Madness

A Sourcebook of Darkness for Mage: The Ascension®

the Book of madness™

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Prelude: Evading Hell

Standing up against the railing of the wind-swept bridge, Mark felt a moment of unease. While he knew intellectually that he wasn't likely to suddenly slip — vaulting over the old wooden rails and plummeting into the river gorge below — the all-too-human nervousness with dizzying heights settled into his stomach. It wasn't so much the jagged stones or the white water that troubled him as it was the perspective. *Down* seemed like such a terrifying idea — especially an uncontrolled descent. He wondered idly what the famous "sudden stop" really felt like before tugging his coat more tightly around himself and turning away.

"Boo," came a young voice from just off to Mark's left. He twitched slightly but managed to keep himself from jumping.

"Could you make a little more noise next time, please?" Mark grumbled. "I don't relish falling off a bridge and plummeting to my demise because of an unexpected surprise, love."

Lee Ann shrugged her bare shoulders, her hands in the pockets of her shorts. Mark idly wondered at why she didn't wear more on such a cold day, but then, his own Paradoxical curse of chills kept him from judging temperatures very accurately in any case. Lee Ann quirked a smile as she swaggered to the railing next to him and replied, "I'm sure that if you did, you'd just fly away with one of your invocations."

Mark leaned briefly against the rails, which emitted an unhappy groan. He quickly thought better of it, straightened and simply shot Lee Ann a deadpan look.

"Looking into the Abyss?" Lee Ann queried after a moment.

Mark glanced back toward the gorge and answered, "More literally, less metaphorically." He took a moment to brush his hair, which had become unruly again.

Lee Ann leaned against the railing without a care. She glanced down at the gorge, then cocked her head to one side and regarded Mark with a grin. "So, you gonna to tell me how business is going on your end, or are you just gonna gawk for a while?"

Letting out a heavy sigh, Mark shifted in place and commented, "Right, business as usual. Some days I wonder why I get out of bed. Then I realize that it's because I don't have a *normal* job like other people. Anyway…" He pulled a somewhat crumpled cigarette from his pack and lit it. After taking a quick drag, he continued, "Getting sporadic reports from all over the place about people pulling together. Not always easily or well, mind you, but things are starting to turn around. A cabal in Rio de Janeiro managed to help stem the tide of an imminent outbreak of disease; they stayed together afterward to swap ideas during clean-up. San Francisco's pretty under wraps, as you'd expect, with Hollow Ones and Tradition members keeping the city's spirit alive — literally. Seems the city spirits are in some turmoil 'bout some sort of impending 'invasion,' though nobody knows what. London's got some underground Hermetic strength on the rise, pulling together from old stockpiles of information and even, according to one account, duking it out with a liche and coming away bloody but unbowed. S'like after the initial shock wore off, our kind shook the sleep out of their eyes and got busy."

Lee Ann quirked a skeptical eyebrow, then tersely said, "So what's the bad news? Surely we don't have to plot and scheme on rickety bridges if everything's going all right."

Cigarette dangling from his lip, Mark intoned, "Too many bad signs. You know about all those prophecies being fulfilled — heck, you clued me into half of 'em. I'm kinda worried about getting *too* optimistic. I don't wanna see us take a beating because of overconfidence." He coughed once.

"Any specifics?" Lee Ann pressed. She squinted, as if to scrutinize Mark closely.

"Well…" he hesitated. "I'm most concerned over that stanza in the so-called Prophecy of the Phoenix, really. 'The age of Earth is at an end, the age of Fire is at hand.' Yeah, it fits the prophecy standards for annoyingly vague. Still, it can mean a lot of things, but most of them I think would be pretty bad."

"Pays to be careful," Lee Ann opined. "I've done a little looking myself, and portents aren't good. The future's really muddy and there's some sort of… wall, I guess… blocking sight. It's almost like it's moving, but it's settling. Making it impossible to really see the outcome of anything beyond a certain point. I've seen the restructuring of the Traditions, but it doesn't make much sense — a man with no face, just a ball of shining light, and a woman who has a round shield and a spear. Symbolic, you know? I don't think it'll be in time."

Mark pointed with his cigarette. "In time for what. That's the question that keeps bothering me." He glanced down the length of the bridge, then into the gorge as he flicked ash down the receding depths. "It's weird. I heard one cabal cut a deal with the Technocrats and both sides managed to uphold it. I know that we've survived this crappy fighting with vampires, with ourselves, with God-knows-what. Our enemy now is time. We have to finish dicking around and put our shit together in a big way so that we can finally bust out in time for this mythic Armageddon."

Lee Ann made a *moue*, seeming skeptical.

"Yeah," Mark continued, "I know I'm not supposed to believe in that shit, but hey, we can't help but get a little superstitious in our old age, you know?" He chuckled, a dry laugh largely devoid of humor. "Look, here's the deal. We've gotta get a big conclave together. Xoca's gonna try to come up, and Simon Pain, and some of the other folks we've dealt with. Winter. White. Hell, someone said that a woman claiming to be one of the Ahl-i-Batin crawled out from under some rock wanting to talk — brought into the deal by Penny out in 'Frisco, no less. So, Los Angeles. Fall."

"Los Angeles?" Lee Ann queried.

"Don't ask me," Mark said with a shake of his head. "I guess it's pretty big for us mages of the Americas. Professor Savante's doing something similar out in Paris, getting together Traditionalists in Europe. Catherine's supposed to set up a teleconference so that the folks in Paris can pipe in their input as well. When we pull this off, we'll figure out where the heck we really stand. New lines of communication. Free exchange of ideas, unfettered by old grudges. Sorta like the NAFTA of Tradition society."

Lee Ann sidled a bit closer and put her hand on Mark's arm. "So why are you so worried? Things are looking up, right?"

Mark flicked the remnants of his cigarette off the bridge and blew out the last breath of smoke in a heavy exhalation. "Because big stuff never goes down without some sort of shit. We stumble into little crap all the time, Lee Ann. Imagine what'll happen when a hundred of the world's worst reality offenders assemble in the same room. Even if we overcome the butting egoes and the stupid recriminations, we'll be like a giant fuck-magnet. 'Hey! Consensus! Over here! Fuck us, please!' But it's the best shot we've got. That's why I'm worried, because there's no way to tell how this will end, no way to see if the gain is worth the risk. Or hell, even if we're doing the right thing."

Mark squared his shoulders and hunched for a moment. "But we gotta move forward, right? I'll make it, too. Just keep people posted. Let 'em know that this is serious. It's not some weed-smoking feel-good convocation. It's back down to the business of settling up hash with the rest of the world. Tell everyone. Get 'em involved. I figure we may make a big target, but we can also make a big splash."

Lee Ann nodded once, then murmured, "Los Angeles. All right." With a sudden motion she leaned forward and kissed Mark on the cheek. As she drew back, her features ran like melted wax — hair darkening, face narrowing to a sharper, more sinister shape.

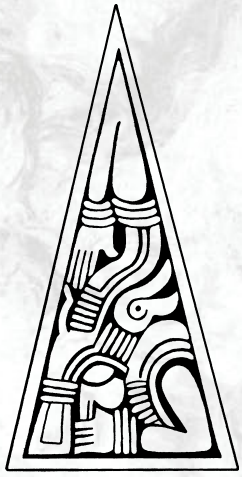
Mark took a quick step to the side, his feet brushing the railing. He stumbled, grabbing the railing for support as the bridge groaned.

"Thank you very much, dear," said Jodi Blake with a grin. "I'll be sure to tell *all* my friends about your party in Los Angeles." In a swift motion, she dove over the railing and into the gorge. As Mark clung to the supports, he watched her plummet heedless into the depths until somewhere near the river below, her body seemed to suddenly burst into a cloud of black fluttering shapes that quickly dispersed.

Mark slowly made it to his feet and picked his way across the bridge to the small car he'd left waiting at one end. He slid into the driver's seat, picked up a cell phone from the dashboard, and made a call.

"Yeah?" came Lee Ann's voice from the other end.

"Hook, line and sinker," Mark said soberly. "Now we just gotta set the traps for when they show up."



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Introduction

There are *things* out there, you know. Not just monsters and freaks, but real, honest-to-badness demons. Malevolent gods. Alien beings that want to devour the world and our souls with it.

Most people don't believe in 'em. Probably because most people never see 'em.

Mages, on the other hand, truck with the supernatural as a matter of course. The undead? Sure; just head out to that S&M club on Thursday night and you can watch them preying. Hauntings? You must mean like the old manor on Lighthouse Hill — the one where the group of school kids broke in and all died in tragic "accidents" overnight. Angels? Yeah, got their names and numbers in a big book. So it's no great surprise that mages tend to stumble across the really *bad* things, too….

Plenty of cocky young newly Awakened twerps think that they can handle anything. Put the smack down on one Technocratic agent (never mind that he's basically a glorified pencil-pushing bureaucrat) and the mage thinks he's the hot shit of the decade. The wise ones shake their heads and make their warnings. Not that it helps; the younger generation never listens. Most of them just have to learn the hard way… assuming they survive.

Because, let's face it, the *things* out there have all the same cards as Earthly mages, and a few extra aces as well. Some of them are mages, or were; back in the day, they sold out or went nuts and wound up terminally fucked up. Of course, this doesn't stop them from still doing all the things that mages do. That's right: Devil-granted gifts, nightmarish boons from entities of outer darkness, even the twisted insights of utter

magical madness *in addition to* all the power of an Awakened mage.

Starting to figure it out?

It's not pretty: Mages who're too full of themselves try to take on the Nephandi and then discover that the corrupters have spent millennia honing the fine arts of misdirection. Just when you think you've got one nailed, it turns out you've stepped into his master plan. The Marauders don't even suffer from Paradox in the same way as mages; they just go about their crazed business of making the world strange and nobody's the wiser, except for the mages they run into. And of course plenty of mages deal with spirits and the Umbra without a clear understanding of the fact that these things aren't human and, in most cases, never were.

Recipies for disaster.

So how does a mage go about dealing with these sorts of things? In a word, carefully. There's a lot to learn, but many mages have run afoul of these entities before. It's not like the Traditions lack for a body of wisdom regarding the various adversaries that can do the most damage. A little bit of *asking around* doesn't hurt. Even the Technocrats have carefully maintained databases of material for their files. Know the enemy, and all that.

That's what's in here: The real enemies. The ones who sell the world down the river, or into madness, or just plain sell out. The things that aren't human and don't get along with mere mortals. All the stuff that any rational, right-thinking person would avoid like the plague. Too bad that most people aren't very rational or right-thinking.

What's Inside

The **Book of Madness** holds keys and insights to the terrible entities mages fear most — the ones they can't understand and control and the ones they might become, given just the wrong circumstances. Storytellers will find these adversaries enough to stand toe-to-toe with any other mage. In addition, some ideas are included on how to make them into more than just villains, into truly terrifying monstrosities. Players be warned — much of the knowledge in here shouldn't be known to your **Mage** characters, so be wary of ruining your fun!

Chapter One: Nephandi describes the denizens of outer darkness, the servants of ancient Oblivion who seek to devour this flawed universe and return it to the primordial nothingness before the error of creation. The Nephandi are the dark reflection of the enlightenment and Ascension for which mages strive. In their bitter hatred of all life, they invert all that mages consider worthwhile and seek to turn everyone to their cause — literally turning creation against itself until it autocannibalizes its way to self-destruction. Perhaps worst of all, they represent the failure that any mage might finally fall to, a grim reminder of the perils of a misstep on the path of Ascension.

Chapter Two: Marauders explores the mad mages whose broken Avatars lead them through a world of magical dynamism and delusion. The Marauders warp the Tapestry around themselves, unconsciously reshaping the world in often dangerous ways. While some are gibbering madmen, others seem sane and lucid until their magic goes awry. Even though caught in permanent Quiets, the Marauders can follow the path of enlightenment. Their path, however, is one unfettered by the forms and structures that most mages take for granted. Whether by curse, damaged Avatar or deranged mind, the Marauders simply can't deal with reality as presented, so they remake the world in the image of the mind's eye.

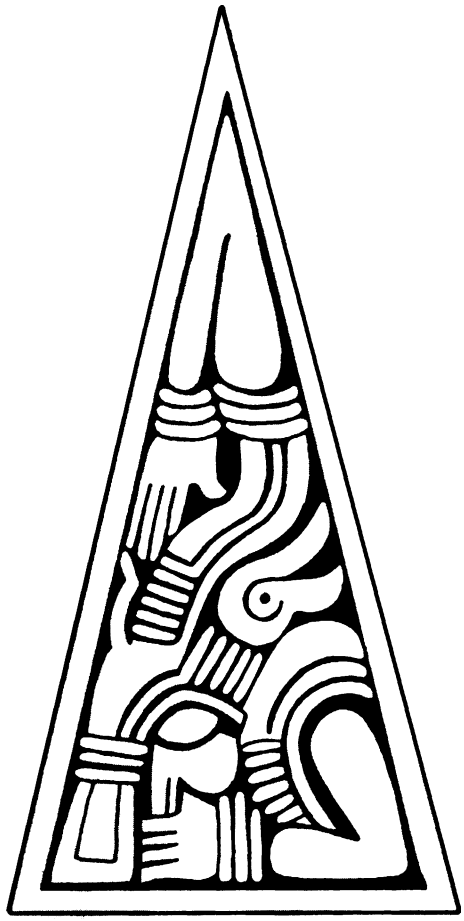
Chapter Three: Infernalism delves into the sell-outs of magely society. The lazy, greedy or cowardly who lack the strength to pursue their own ambitions and turn to demons to grant power. Hell gladly answers, for the usual trade in the coin of souls. It's a quick and easy route to power, but ultimately it brings nothing but misery. Here you'll learn why the infernal cherish the spread of evil and ill will, and what makes mages such tempting prizes — as well as some of the powers they wield.

Chapter Four: Umbrood sheds light on the mysterious dwellers of the Umbra, the spirits and ephemera that exist outside of the physical world. While not wholly incomprehensible, the umbrood often have motives that seem nonsensical to humans. Still, they answer to a celestial order of sorts. The clever mage can deal with umbrood through a combination of wits and magic, but remember: There's always someone higher on the food chain….

Chapter Five: Storytelling ties up the material of this book with advice on how to make your adversaries compelling and creepy, ways to introduce the many foes found in this manual, and ideas on chronicle design stemming from magely villains. Since the Storyteller with **Mage** already has a handle on basic adversaries, this chapter covers more detailed ideas and some esoteric notions like building chronicles centered around an anti-hero or using Marauder characters in an all-crazed-mages game.

HEY, STUPID!

This book deals with such things as black magic, devil worship, rape, torture, cannibalism and a lot of other extremely sick shit. If you don't want to deal with these subjects in your game, then skip it. But more importantly, THIS IS NOT A HOW-TO GUIDE TO SUCH PRACTICES. This is a game, and if you can't tell the difference between fantasy and reality then put the book down and seek professional help.



Chapter One: Nephandi

The whole world singing the same happy tune
Something so low even hound dogs can croon
To insanity
— Richard Thompson, "Bank Vault in Heaven"

Barabbi

"You know, if anyone actually read their Bibles, we wouldn't be able to get away with this shit."

The speaker was a tall man in what could generously be described as an ecclesiastical outfit — black robe, surplice and weighty silver pendant in the shape of a tormented angel. He certainly looked the part of a clergyman, with a bushy black beard spilling down his chest and a sharp, almost aquiline face that looked like it belonged on a prophet. His feet, however were most unclerically shod in Reeboks, and both of them were up on the slate-topped table that also served as an altar for the First Church of the Reformed Angel.

"How do you mean, Jeremiah?" Next to him a smaller man with sandy blonde hair and a decidedly workaday wardrobe meticulously organized the tools of ritual — chalice, incense, wine and knife — with the intense devotion of the truly petty.

"That's Brother Jeremiah, thank you. You never know when one of the flock might be around, so use my proper title, Brother Philip. Do I make myself clear?" "Yes, Brother," the smaller man mumbled. "But you still haven't answered my question."

"Oh, that." Brother Jeremiah stood and stretched, his gargantuan reach making him seem momentarily birdlike. "What are we doing here, Brother Phil? We are running the Church of the Reformed Angel."

"First Church."

"Whatever. Do you have any idea what a reformed angel is?"

Brother Philip looked momentarily lost. "Err, no."

"Neither do they. Truth be told, I don't think such a thing is possible." Jeremiah wandered around the room, carefully sidestepping the randomly assorted furniture that served as pews for his congregation. "But each of our precious little lambs has a very, very good idea of what a reformed angel is, and why that particular celestial being is going to help them out. Where that notion comes from, I have no idea, but it's certainly not in Genesis."

"So?"

"So, in pursuit of their very personal delusions, they do whatever we tell them to do because that's 'the true way.' It's horseshit, of course, but it works for them, and the Silent One takes their worship in the spirit we intend it. This week it's drinking blood in wine, next week it's sacrificing small animals, and before long, well, the sky will be the limit. Or the abyss. You get the idea. And with the Silent One's favor, we'll be able to have some fun indeed."

"We've gotten three new worshippers this week, you know." Brother Phil looked up with an unpleasant expression of eagerness. "All women. All young. All looking for someplace to belong."

"Or someone to belong to, is that what you're thinking? Fine, whatever. Go 'discover' another apocryphal rite or whatever, and be careful aging the paper this time. Last one you did fell to dust while I was in the middle of the service, and I really don't have the energy to put down the flock's hysterics again."

Brother Philip nodded, and started to scurry off. He took two steps, then turned with a puzzled look on his face. "But Brother Jeremiah?"

"Yes? What is it now?"

"What if the Silent One really is a reformed angel?"

And at that, Brother Jeremiah smiled, and Brother Philip saw for the first time how long his teeth were, and how many, and how sharp.

"Somehow," he said pleasantly, "I doubt it's an angel, not any more. Trust me. I know."

Down Among the Fallen

Often villains are fond of claiming that they are misquoted, or misunderstood, or really oppressed heroes whose names have been unjustly tarred by vengeful enemies. Not so the Nephandi. They know what they are and they accept it, with no mamby-pamby moralizing or angst-ridden bemoaning of the fact.

After all, having your Avatar ripped inside out tends to remove the ambiguity from your worldview.

The Nature of Evil

The Nephandi are evil. There's no two ways about it. They're not secretly struggling to bring about a greater good through noble sacrifice, they're not misunderstood, they're not fighting nobly against their baser impulses and they haven't just fallen in with a bad crowd. Each and every Nephandus has on some level, either in this lifetime or a previous one, made the conscious decision to give his soul over to dark and hungry powers of evil. He may have made that decision under duress (often in circumstances engineered by another Nephandus, but that's neither here nor there) but the point remains that the decision was made. Once your Avatar is turned into spiritual origami, that's pretty much that.

That being said, there's a great deal more to evil than insane cackling and mindless homicidal rampages. A Nephandus may genuinely believe in the cause of bringing about the end of all things. He may be seeking some sort of twisted affirmation for his decision to go *barabbi*, which leads him to seduce others to his affiliation. Or maybe he just likes hurting things. The motivations, approaches and tactics of Nephandi can be as varied as you want them to be.

They're just not nice, and they never will be. Ever.

What Is A Nephandus?

Technically, Nephandi are those Awakened souls who serve the forces of darkness, destruction and the utter Void. This is not an alliance of convenience or of choice. These mages have made the conscious decision — either in this lifetime or a previous one — to align themselves with the darker powers. Why they made that decision is, at the moment, irrelevant. The defining, irrevocable factor is that they chose it, and in making that choice, were lost.

All Nephandi work towards what is ultimately the same end: the destruction of Creation. They do not seek to reunify Prime, to find the Tenth Sphere (except perhaps in its Qlippothic (or evil) form, so as to use it for a tool of destruction) or to rule the world. They have no interest in remaking the Tellurian in their masters' image, except as a step on the road to Oblivion. Nephandi do not have a preferred side in the Ascension War, except for their own. They regard the Conventions and Traditions as equally hostile, and they are correct. That is not to say they won't pretend to pick one side or another in a pinch, but in the end, they want everyone dead. A Nephandus will readily help a Dreamspeaker take out a HIT-Mark squad, and then turn around and destroy the Dreamspeaker as well.

However, that goes both ways. Both Tradition and Technocracy mages regard the Nephandi as by far the worse of two evils. Iterators and Cultists of Ecstasy will work side by side to eliminate any Nephandi they run across, on the sound assumption that as bad as the other side might be, the Nephandi are assuredly worse. Indeed, the 1945 alliance between Conventions and Traditions demonstrates the degree to which other factions believe that Nephandi, not each other, are the ultimate enemy. Facing this united front, the Nephandi have fallen naturally into trickery and subversion. Otherwise, they would have been destroyed long ago.

In essence, the Nephandi are the shaded side of the Ascension War. Whether born with a Nephandus soul (widderslainte) or corrupted from the service of one of the other factions (*barabbi*), the ranks of the Nephandi consist of those workers of magic who have given themselves, heart and especially soul, to the service of utterly inhuman Things.

Outsiders divide the Nephandi into three sects, classifying them by their objects of worship. Unsurprisingly, these divisions are artificial and often incorrect, but they serve as a rough guide for the uninitiated. Demon-worshipping Infernalists work for the pleasure of the Demon Lords; these Nephandi hew closely to the traditional image of the antisocial occultist. Stranger still are the Malfeans, those Nephandi who have given themselves over to the worship of the cosmological embodiment of final entropy — the so-called Wyrm of Destruction. These mages share in the corruption enjoyed by other spiritual entities gone bad, such as werewolves seduced to evil or spirits that serve oblivion. Finally, there are those who worship the Things in the Outer Dark; these last are perhaps the truest Nephandi of them all.

Drawing Down the Dark

The hierarchy of raw power is the only organization the Nephandi know. Those with more magical power, cunning and ruthlessness claw their way closer to the exalted Lords in the Dark, while those less fortunate, experienced or powerful are left in lesser ranks. Theoretically, marching orders come from one of the entities the Nephandi worship, down through the gilledians and their associated prelati to the adsinistrati, shaytans and pawns in the field. Of course, it rarely works that way. Even as the various Dark Lords contend against one another in the Infernal Realms and the Outer Dark, so too do their servants jockey for position in and around Earth. Orders can get lost, assignments can be altered, and political opponents can be betrayed — the variations are practically infinite. However, it doesn't appear as if the Dark Lords much care about this corruption of the letter of their purpose, so long as the end result is satisfactory.

What's In a Name?

Scholars have been arguing as to the origins of the name "Nephandi" for quite some time. The "ph" would indicate a Greek origin, but the "nd" conjunction of letters implies the Latin gerund form. To confuse matters further, the only mythological reference that might even be vaguely connected with those who serve the Outer Darkness is the story of the "Nephilim," the gigantic sons of mortal women and angels mentioned briefly in the Old Testament. At the moment, the best guess that anyone has is that early Nephandi in the Middle East may well have claimed to have been children of the Other Things, and by the time the story made its way to the Greek-speaking cities of Asia minor, the Fallen Ones had been thoroughly confused with the mythological giants. With the story garbled, it only makes sense that the name would be garbled as well.

Soldiers of Nightmare

Authority among the Nephandi rests with your ability to back up your words and nothing else — "official" rank is less important than magical power. However, some among the Nephandi feel that they must maintain appearances, and as such have devised a loose system of ranks into which they slot all of their compatriots. The lower a Nephandus is on the totem pole, the more important he thinks rank is; more experienced Nephandi only use their titles to cow their inferiors.

• Pawns (un-Awakened) — Ranging from cultists to rent-a-thugs, these pawns are in it for the money, the promised power and the thrill of inevitable violence. Few of these pawns have much of an idea of what they're actually working for, and few except K'llashaa cultists even care. Any adsinistratus worth his salt has easy access to a small horde of un-Awakened pawns who run errands, serve as muscle and occasionally cover hasty escapes.

• Pawns (Awakened) — The irony is that most mages who fall under this designation don't think it applies to them. Most Awakened pawns dwell in a state of advanced denial, thinking that they can go back to their Technocracy or Tradition friends whenever they want. This denial, however, can provoke fatally dangerous whiplash; calling a pawn on her new affiliation might lead her to a murderous response.

Mages hate facing Awakened pawns in combat, and with good reason. Such pawns often demonstrate visible remorse, even as they summon up killing magics — but that hint of remorse can cause a Tradition mage to pause *just long enough*. Awakened pawns are almost always irredeemable, but every so often a Tradition mage thinks that this time will be different — and gets a face full of Entropy as fitting reward for his compassion.

• Shaytans — The Fallen version of SWAT troopers, shaytans describe their profession as "killin' thangs." They refer to seducers as "administrati," and cordially loathe the rules-mongers wherever they find them. There's more to the destroyers, however, than cute nicknames and bad attitude; shaytans are deadly combat effectives with both magical and conventional training. Many are little more than living weapons, honed in the Labyrinths and placed in the hand of an adsinistratus, to do with as he wills.

• Adsinistrati — The salesmen of the Abyss, adsinistrati make damnation seem attractive. The best adsinistrati can convince devout Technocrats to walk, smiling, into the Abyss, but fortunately seducers this good are few and far between. As adsinistratus service involves a lot of field work; there's a high turnover rate in the profession. Few adsinistrati survive a year on the job; those who do, however, are absolutely deadly.

Few mages ever meet a Nephandus of rank higher than adsinistratus, but generally that's more than enough. While adsinistrati can reach gilledean heights of power, the majority of these Nephandi rely on their wits and winning personalities as much as their magical skills. Still, underestimating an adsinistratus as an enemy is an easy way to get yourself killed.

An adsinistratus never initiates conflict unless her back is to the wall. After all, the point is to spread destruction, not be destroyed. Even with one foot in the grave, an adsinistratus will attempt to sell her killers on the gospel of the void. In all cases, adsinistrati are unfailingly polite, attractive and persuasive — until you cross them. Then, whatever formidable powers they possess are unleashed, without mercy or reservation.

• Prelati — The eyes and hands of the gilledeans, the prelati roam the Tapestry doing the wills of all of their Masters — and getting in a little recreation on the side. Powerful but not ostentatious, a prelati hangs back and lets others take the risks, unveiling only as much of his potential as a given situation demands. Particularly sensitive matters can demand the attention of a prelati, but even in these cases the so-called "sentinels" assemble teams of shaytans and adsinistrati, sending them in to do the dirty work. There have been perhaps a half-dozen cases in the past 30 years when prelati actually got their hands dirty in fieldwork, but each time the repercussions of the events echoed for a decade afterwards.

Most prelati travel alone, but all can summon help almost instantly. Sentinels also cut the occasional deal with Technocracy or Tradition mages, depending on circumstances. Small matters of principle are less important to prelati than accomplishing their overall goals.

• Gilledeans — According to unofficial sources, there are eight living gilledeans, four dead ones who have bound their souls to their rotting bodies and one who is neither alive nor dead, but who seems to have achieved an existence outside of time. Old, powerful, and insanely paranoid, these elder *barabbi* almost never leave their places of power.

The reason for this behavior is fear. Each gilledean dwells in constant terror of assassination by one of his rivals and sees potential traps in every inch of reality outside his own walls. On the exceedingly rare occasions when another Nephandus must deal with a gilledean, the outsider is bound and brought to the gilledean's home. Generally, gilledeans work through their servants; not one Nephandus in a hundred has actually met one.

While not shy about using their powers, gilledeans fear Paradox intensely; thus, they have grown exceedingly subtle in their Arts. More than one Nephandus has

compared the behavior of the gilledeans to that of certain vampires who, having lived long enough to have tasted immortality, are that much more fearful of losing it.

• Aswadim — Teachers and sages, the aswadim prefer to interfere with mages' magical development rather than in their day-to-day affairs. An aswad never announces himself as such. He merely finds a way to get close to a promising Nephandus and then takes the student under his wing. When he feels the student has learned enough, the aswad vanishes, rarely (if ever) speaking to his student again.

Occasionally an aswad may take it upon himself to extricate his student from a particularly dangerous situation, but the student who relies upon this sort of rescue isn't long for this world. Instead, the aswads prefer to let their students fend for themselves. After all, they reason, a student who constantly needs assistance isn't worth teaching.

FACTIONS

Just as the Technocracy and Council split into Conventions and Traditions with sometimes competitive agendas, the Nephandi are factionalized in varied approaches to Oblivion. To an outsider, the difference between an Infernal Nephandus and a Malfean one is largely irrelevant. After all, it really doesn't matter to most mages if their enemies are calling on Geryon of the Seventh Circle or He Who Shudders In Outermost Night; the end result is the same. To the Nephandi, however, it matters a great deal.

The three sects of the Nephandi are the Infernal, the Malfean and the K'llashaa. The borders between the sects are defined by the sorts of entities the members serve, though there's a nigh-infinite variety within each sect from which the discriminating Nephandus can choose. All other differences between the sects flow from this original choice. In most — if not all — cases, a Nephandus' sect is determined by the sect of the mage who recruits or turns her.

More disturbingly, self-Awakened Nephandi are generally found by the Power they end up serving. Often, first contact is made through a series of nightmares or by a Sending, either of which serves to guide the freshly minted Nephandus to others of his ilk. The Infernal Powers tend to be the most active at this sort of thing, as they are perhaps the most human (using the term loosely) of the entities the Nephandi worship. Dreams sent by the Maeljin Incarna are often wordless collages of pure emotion that may serve to energize the recipient but rarely to instruct her. Those sent by the Lords of the Outer Darkness have a nasty tendency of driving their recipients quite mad, which cuts down on their effectiveness as a recruiting tool.

Nephandi who are either found or turned by others are, in most cases, indoctrinated into the sect and particular worship of those who train them. In the case of the *barabbi*, the trip to the Caul also involves a visitation with one's chosen lord and master, establishing the parameters for the rest of their Fall. If an Infernal Lord is involved, a deal has generally been struck prior to the ritual itself and the inversion of the Avatar seals the bargain. For members of the other two sects, the meeting with an aspect of the being they now worship is its own reward — and punishment.

In the case of a widderslainte, it is not uncommon for the being to whom the Avatar was pledged in a previous incarnation to come looking for it in this one. If the widderslainte has already pledged allegiance to something else, the resulting metaphysical disagreement can spill over into inter-sect squabbling. There have been instances when Technocracy cleanup teams have stormed into a suspected Nephandi nest, only to find all the inhabitants already dead. This sort of disagreement over a particularly juicy Avatar is often the cause.

THE INFERNAL

Infernalist Malfeans are the best-organized, most human and least obvious of the Nephandi. While their hallmark is the fact that each and every one has sold his soul to one of the Demon Lords, their allegiance is at least understandable, if not admirable. That, in part, is what makes them so dangerous.

The Infernal Nephandi like doing business in the mortal world. They infiltrate society, doing their best to subvert from within rather than tear it down from without. That, after all, is the Lords of the Pit's job. They're simply there to prepare the way, and it's a lot easier to do so when they're not on the run from both cops and other mages every five minutes.

Infernalist Nephandic metaphysics is the most readily recognizable to outsiders. The position of these Infernalists is that the Lords of the Pit do in fact exist, and claim the Earth as their rightful domain. It is the Nephandi's considered decision to assist them in this effort, to reject the claims of Heaven and break the gates of Hell, and hopefully to pick up a great deal of personal power in the

process. Of all the Nephandic sects, it is the Infernalists who cling most tightly to the illusion that they have some control over their situation. The Demon Lords know this, of course, and take ruthless advantage of it.

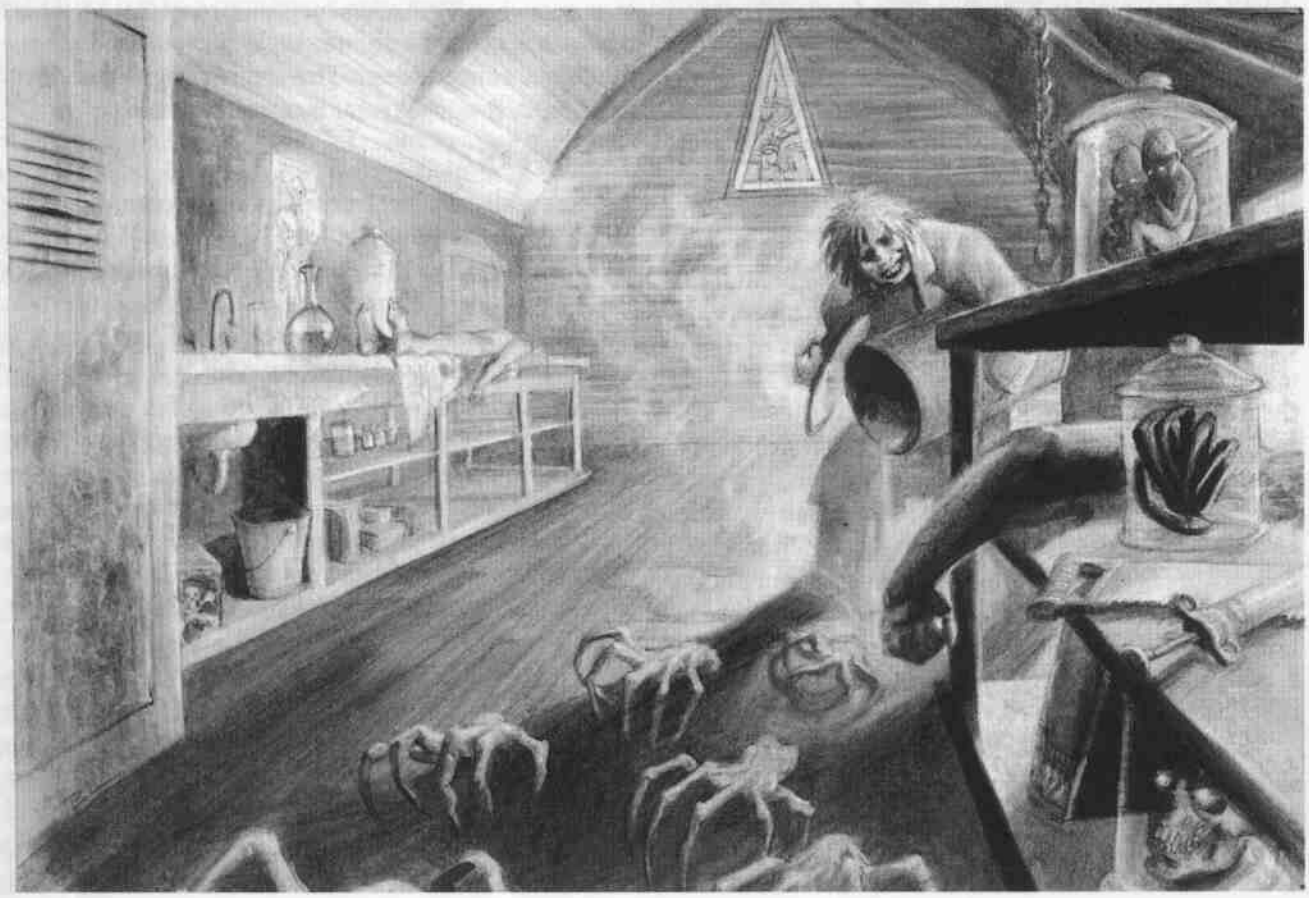
In part because so many of them were once Hermetic mages, and in part because by doing so they imitate their masters, Infernalist Nephandi tend to be rigidly hierarchical. Status, both individual and as related to the particular Demon Lord one dealt with, carries great weight in Infernalist circles. Many Nephandi continuously go back to the well, bartering more and more to their masters in exchange for a little more help gaining status. Unfortunately for the Nephandi, the Demon Lords do occasionally converse, and often conspire to continuously up the ante.

When it comes to dealing with the outside world, however, these Nephandi are smooth, organized and professional. Of all the sects, they have the best success rate for recruiting *barabbi*, in part because they can make concrete offers and show proof of the benefits of crossing over. Their field teams are precise and well-trained, and they make a point of preparing for every contingency.

Many Infernalist Nephandi (though by no means all) have convoluted arrangements with their demonic overlords for the delivery of souls, victims and other such trinkets. Because these arrangements tend to be regular ("Seven victims every seven years" is a particular favorite), these Nephandi can become predictable to those who watch them carefully enough. As a result, skilled Nephandi hunters can sometimes trap Infernalists by putting them between a rock (the necessity to come out in the open to obtain victims for sacrifice) and a hard place (the displeasure of the Lords of the Pit if their demands are not met).

Infernalist Nephandi who do not keep their agreements with the Infernal Powers are in a great deal of trouble. A bloody, disfiguring reprimand is the best they can hope for, while the worst is an immediate repossession of their soul. As such, Hell-bound Nephandi are very careful to keep their masters appeased, often to the point of stashing away victims months in advance — just in case.

While the threat of being swallowed up by the bargain they've made haunts Infernalist Nephandi, however, they have no qualms about routinely summoning lesser Infernal entities — demons being a particular favorite — for all sorts of tasks. Some serve as instructors, others as bodyguards or shock troops. A few are called up simply to see if the mage in question can in fact do so. As a result, these Fallen are quite at home dealing with all sorts of monstrosities and are rarely taken by surprise by anything they come across.



Most rites and practices of Infernalist Nephandi are formal and well-structured. As their Summonings depend on letter-perfect obedience to formula, the Nephandi are meticulous, serious and studious when it comes to their labors. In some ways, these Nephandic rites do hew to the stereotype of Satanic cults — black robes, chanting and desecrations of holy items are common — but they are the original from which the stereotype descends. Outsiders are not welcome at Infernal Nephandic rites, and trespassers are either forced to bear witness and then murdered, or added to the evening's sacrifice. These rituals do take place on a complicated, but regular basis, and every Infenalist Nephandi knows that calendar by heart.

Unlike the other two sects, Infernalist Nephandi have very little esprit de corps. They are fiercely competitive with one another, vying for hellish attention and favor. As such, they will sometimes hamstring one another, an activity which is tacitly condoned by the fractious Princes of the Pit. Such backbiting vanishes, however, when an external threat appears. While Infernalist Nephandi may bicker about where they stand with one another, they know where they stand with the rest of the world.

The Malfean Nephandi

Malfean Nephandi worship the entities collectively known as the Maeljin Incarna, personifications of foul archetypes such as Corruption, Seduction, Defilement and so forth. Devoted to the notion of destruction, they wallow in filth and degradation, and then set out to drag the rest of Creation into the mire with them.

The process of Rebirth is somewhat different for Malfean Nephandi than for the other sects. The Caul they traverse is the so-called Black Spiral, and the ninety-nine steps of its path wreak irrevocable havoc on the minds of those who tread it. After Rebirth, Malfean Nephandi are never quite the same, as if some small portion of their selves has been removed and replaced with a tiny fragment of something indescribably more ancient, more powerful and more evil.

The ultimate entity to which Malfean Nephandi owe allegiance is the embodiment of the principle of destruction, known by a variety of epithets and surrounded by a swarm of lesser, yet similar entities. Indeed, much of their worship is curiously pure, as they venerate principles as opposed to idiosyncratic entities. Since their final goal is to let loose destruction personified on Earth, it lends their practice a curious symmetry.

Of all the Nephandi, the Malfean sect's devotees are the most likely to be surrounded by monstrosities and relics of torture. They commune often with greater and lesser spirits of corruption, and either bind them into service or accept offerings of twisted creatures from them to act as servants. These beings, called fomori (after monstrously twisted creatures out of Irish myth), are usually debased and corrupted specimens of normal animal life, now subverted by the powers of corruption. They are more or less controllable, and more or less obedient, but they have no love for life. Furthermore, they have a nasty tendency to slip the leash, thus alerting others to the Nephandus' presence. Malfean pawns also have a tendency to become possessed by these spirits of corruption and to mutate monstrously as a result. By the time the effects make themselves manifest, however, the pawn himself is usually past caring. Even the Nephandi themselves tend to look haggard and run down, if not outright deformed after a few years of service. As shabby as they are, however, they're still brutally effective, particularly against those who underestimate them because of their appearance.

Malfean Nephandic practice is more perverse than even that of the K'llashaa. It is a ritual abnegation of the principles of life, light and creation, a mechanistic breaking of something good on the altar of evil. Malfean worship sites tend to be based around a spiral pattern, with the sacrifice performed at the center and stations along the way where worshippers must perform acts of degradation. It is not uncommon for Malefean Nephandi to whip themselves into a Bacchic frenzy and rend themselves along with their sacrificial victims, but the beings they serve don't care. The blood and the pain are what matters to them, not the identity of the one bleeding.

Malfean places of worship are often hastily constructed and poorly concealed. Cities house as many as swamps. Often their presence is almost a stated challenge to the rest of the Awakened world, as the great Wyrm of destruction is just as happy devouring its followers as its enemies. It is rare, however, for a Malfean hive to be located anywhere but the poorest, most desolate or most run-down of surroundings. The

Titles

Malfean Nephandi unfailingly use the standard titles around other Nephandi. This particularly irritates Infernalist Nephandi, who feel that the Malfeans are deliberately mocking them by doing so. Friction between those two groups is about as high as it gets among the Nephandi, as the Infernalists' highly structured notions of damnation stand at odds with the formless destruction the Malfeans embrace. The controversy over titles is just one tiny aspect of the debate.

very notion of delicate, refined surroundings runs counter to Malfean Nephandic practice.

The K'llashaa

At once the least numerous and most disturbing of the Nephandi, the K'llashaa have voluntarily surrendered their claim to be human. Rather, they view themselves as tools in the hands (or less identifiable pseudopods) of the Lords of the Outer Darkness. According to the K'llashaa, the Lords once ruled Earth, and their dominion extended across the stars. Life began as their plaything, and it is theirs to snuff out at their whim. However, through treachery and guile the Lords were banished to their current home beyond space and time (which is to say, well beyond the Horizon). Still, their will and their power reaches back into the Tellurian, and summons their faithful servants to prepare the way for their return. Then, when the door is opened by sacrifice and pain, the dance of blood and madness will being anew. This time, it will endure forever.

At least, that's the theory. What is known for certain is that the K'llashaa do in fact worship entities called the Lords of the Outer Dark, though most of the evidence as to these beings' existence comes from either K'llashaa themselves or their thoroughly insane victims. Whether or not the Lords once ruled Earth. however, is irrelevant. The fact of the matter is that in some form or fashion, they exist, and they view Earth as rightfully theirs. The K'llashaa have agreed to lend their labors and souls to the effort to return the Lords to Earth. In exchange, they receive knowledge and power with which to do their masters' bidding.

As the Lords of the Outer Darkness are inhuman, so do their worshippers strive to remake themselves in that image. While their is little evidence that the Lords themselves have a particular taste for ritualistic murder, torture and sadism, they do drink deeply of pain and suffering. And so, to consecrate themselves unto their dark lords, the K'llashaa solemnly engage in orgies of murder and less savory acts. Some K'llashaa believe that when they have generated enough pain, the doors of reality will swing open and allow the Lords to return to Earth. Others simply channel the pain and suffering to their dark overlords, or view it as a necessary sacrament in their servitude.

K'llashaa are relatively few in number. By its very nature, their method of worship is ill-suited to keeping a low profile. As a result, they tend to be flushed out into the open more than members of the other two sects, which has lead to the K'llashaa being held up as the archetypal picture of all Nephandi. This is far from the truth, but it serves the Malfean and Infernal Nephandi's agendas, so they allow the myth to continue.

Rarely do K'llashaa work in groups of more than three. On the rare occasions when they set up a cult as cover, they may well have as many as two dozen Unawakened followers, but one never finds more than a handful of K'llashaa in one place on Earth. Most are solitary practicioners, moving from city to city every few months so as to avoid pursuit. Many also serve as information gatherers and scouts for other K'llashaa, the better to aid in labors like finding and desecrating nodes, or picking off solitary mages.

The K'llashaa do spend a great deal of their time in worship and study. Most rarely stir from their nests, which can range from pits of utter squalor to vast and secluded mansions. The one thing all K'llashaa lairs have in common, however, is that they are veritable hives of foulness. The stink of their Resonance can often be felt miles away, though clever Nephandi take steps to hide this. In addition, many K'llashaa lairs feature amenities such as torture gardens, extensive video equipment setups to record the sufferings of their victims and a series of booby-traps for the unwary interloper. K'llashaa also frequently have watchers (human or otherwise) set around their lairs, and in most cases would rather run when warned than fight. It is not that they fear death. Rather, they fear what might come after if they have to report failure to the Lords of the Outer Dark.

A fair number of K'llashaa dwell off Earth. Few go beyond the Horizon and fewer still return, but there are a great many locales elsewhere that are home to K'llashaa. Off Earth, they congregate in greater numbers and show less restraint, if such is possible. A K'llashaa's Labyrinth in a Horizon realm is liable to be a veritable monument to nightmare and pain, such that even other Nephandi are squeamish about visiting.

What Hierarchy?

Many K'llashaa have no use for the aswad/gilledean/prelati/adsinistrati/etc. hierarchy of titles within the Nephandi, though they are forced to respect the power of the aswadim. Instead, most K'llashaaic groups invent their own hierarchies, with the leader usually bearing some title equating to "priest." After all, they have bigger things on what's left of their minds than job titles.

Quaint and Curious Rites

The rituals of the K'llashaa are anything but quaint. They are carefully orchestrated to funnel pain and suffering past the Horizon to the Outer Dark, where the Lords will feed and grow fat upon it. While the observance may seem ragged to outsiders, the central focused intent is serious indeed. Above and beyond the chanting and responses, there is a dark and deadly intent at work. Not every rite ends in a killing, but there is always some sort of sacrifice, be it of blood, power, animals or even people. Often self-mutilation is involved, with a clasping of hands around a blade being a particular favorite. Sites used for K'llashaa rituals are always consecrated to whichever dark beings the local high priest worships personally, and often are redecorated in blood, offal and less identifiable things. Contrary to popular belief, the K'llashaa don't go in for many-tentacled statuettes or other trappings of worship, though the high priest usually has some sort of symbol of office. Rather, the tools of their rites are dreadfully functional: knives, sickles, an altar, basins to catch blood.

In short, mages used to garden-variety Satanist dilettantes are in for a terrible shock when they finally see the K'llashaa at work. There's no pretense or bravado here, no need to dress up in black robes and play spooky music. The K'llashaa know what they're doing, and they're very effective at it. When it comes to summoning the powers of the Outer Dark, the Nephandi simply do not dabble.

Dances With Elder Things: Politics

The best earthly parallel for the politics of the Labyrinths is the medieval court. Substitute the Demon Lords, Malfean Incarna and Outer Things for medieval lords, rank-and-file Nephandi for their courtiers, and the rest falls into place. Depending on which Demon Lord is ascendant at the moment, or which Fringe Dweller has plunged into nothingness, the followers of that particular entity may find their fortunes on the rise or wane. Vicious infighting rages between the servants of assorted Outer Lords; there are no rules and no mercy in these wars. Privately, some gilledeans suspect that the Lords of the Nephandi encourage this internecine squabbling as a way of culling the weak from their service — and as entertainment.

Infernalist Nephandi have the best organization and as such, the fiercest and best-established rivalries. While the squabbles of the Outsiders may be perfectly vicious, the ambiguous nature of what exactly the Nephandi are fighting for tends to limit the lifespan of such conflicts. The organization of Malfean Nephandi tends to break down along looser lines, however, and as such factions rarely coalesce long enough to engage in any sort of squabbling. On the other hand, should anyone else maneuver against a Malfean's position, the interloper is likely to find himself swarmed by all of the local Malfeans. Infernalists accuse Malfeans of ignoring details, Malfeans claim that Infernalists who work one soul at a time are petty and small-minded, Outsiders insist that both groups are ignoring the truth of their struggle and so the merry chase goes.

Most of the fighting isn't out in the open; far from it. Politicking and the extraction of promises of favors and service are also parts of the endless dance of knives. There is also a lively trade in favors and dispensations, but petitioners for help place themselves in a perilous position. Asking for help from someone who serves another entity is tantamount to admitting that her patron is superior to yours; incurring debts to servants of other Powers may have your own Patron looking askance at you.

In the field, while the deadly games still go on, they tend to be subdued in the face of the enemy. It's a truism among the Benevolent Society that you're safe from your adsinistratus until the second you've completed the job — but getting the job done is what comes first.

Wars in the Outside

When not settled by a serrated knife in the back or some suitably esoteric display of Entropy magics, disputes among the Nephandi are brought to court for the Nephandi equivalent of litigation. The court in question can be found in one of the Labyrinths, usually the one with the most ties to the stronger party. Courts are formal occasions, half bloodsport and half pantomime, with the highest ranking prelati or (in rare instances) gilledian present presiding over the affair. Depending upon the whim of the presiding judge, there may or may not be evidence or a jury, and torture may or may not be used on any and all parties. Trials by combat, fire or Umbrood are common (if a bit jejune at this point), and divinations as to the truth of the matter may be read in the entrails of innocent bystanders.

This isn't to say that the verdict of a court is binding, merely entertaining. Court is often an excuse for a carnival, with dancers, jugglers and more perverse entertainers amusing the crowd (and the jury). Indeed, some Nephandi set up court appearances for themselves, just so they can make a splash in the social whirl of the Labyrinths.

The Nephandic Mission

In the end, what the Nephandi are out to do is end everything. This is their underlying ambition, and what they ultimately (in the truest sense of the word) strive for. That being said, few Nephandi will admit this, even to themselves. Instead, they focus on somewhat different, more conventionally explicable goals — corruption and summoning. The fact that accomplishing said goals will, in the end, lead to the final destruction of Creation, is merely semantics. After all, even a soul-twisted servant of a power of the outer darkness needs some motivation, and inevitable self-destruction doesn't always get the job done.

Blood and Souls

Barter in souls has always gone hand-in-hand with legends of the demonic and Fallen. Modern Nephandi are proud upholders of that tradition of temptation. Just as they themselves have chosen the path of Descent, they actively work to put others on that track as well.

What the Nephandi do, however, is not limited to anything so crude as the stereotypical Faustian bargain. A Nephandus doesn't simply arrive in someone's life,

offer to purchase their soul and then complete the transaction like a banker signing off on a mortgage. Instead, what the Nephandi engage in is a widespread campaign of corruption, degradation and seduction. They seek to destroy the best and exalt the worst, and by doing so convince the masses that there's nothing to stop them from listening to their worst instincts. There's no market for souls in jars, in any case. The Nephandi aren't after collections of souls to torment or possess. They simply want to drag others down, and that in and of itself is, for many of them, enough.

Small Change: Sleepers

Surprisingly, a fair bit of effort is devoted to tainting, corrupting and otherwise destroying mere mortals. Considering the sheer number of Sleepers versus the number of Nephandi, it would seem a waste of time, but nevertheless the Fallen are constantly on the lookout for fresh meat.

The reasons for doing so are many and varied. The more souls that the Nephandi have their hooks in, the more strength the Nephandic consensual reality gains, and that in and of itself justifies some efforts in this area. However, there are other reasons. Some mortals are worth corrupting to bring their assets under Nephandic control. Others are near and dear to those whom Nephandi wish to torment. Many Nephandi serve entities to whom pain and suffering are meat and drink, and so the corruption of Sleepers is nothing less than a burnt offering on an unholy altar. In some cases, the degradation of others counts for status in Nephandic society, with those who bring in the biggest catches accorded more respect and privileges.

And some of them just like hurting people.

The Big Prize: The Awakened

Quality versus quantity: That is the essence of the difference between corrupting a single mage as opposed to tainting a hundred Sleepers. The benefits of creating a *barabbus* are obvious. It's one fewer enemy to face, another magical ally in the fold, and another source of information as to how the enemy operates. After all, even the most horrifying trip to the Cauls rarely causes amnesia, and the *barabbus* who emerges is still fully aware of his former associates' defenses, tendencies and weak spots. Furthermore, since most *barabbi* don't announce themselves as such, turning one mage creates the opportunity to send a deep cover mole back into Technocratic or Tradition operations. While to actively attempt conversion of a mage is dangerous work, the rewards are so obvious and extensive that recruiting is high on the Nephandic list of priorities.

Mine! Mine! Mine!

In the wake of recent events, the loose alliance of Nephandic sects has become even looser. With the disappearances of many of the Nephandic entities, each sect is scrambling to buttress its power and often does so at the others' expense. Competition for souls, especially Awakened ones, has reached a fever pitch, and the Nephandi are not beneath sabotaging one another's efforts when it comes to a really juicy recruit. It is becoming increasingly common for a Tradition mage to be tipped off that his new friend is really an adsinistratus — by another adsinistratus of a different sect.

The down side to this self-sabotage by the Nephandi is that with the recruiting game having gotten even deadlier, what vestiges of restraint they might once have shown have been thrown off, permanently.

A Nephandus who brings in a potential *barabbus* instantly gains a great deal of status from her peers, though this usually comes in equal parts of respect and envy. A recruiter who is too successful may find her efforts sabotaged by jealous comrades who don't appreciate being shown up. Someone who brings in too many new recruits is also likely to incur suspicion of trying to build up a power base, with predictable results.

Tactics

As noted previously, the Nephandi don't operate like insurance salesmen. Rather, they have a variety of approaches, each tailored to a specific situation. Bribes, threats, campaigns of terror and attrition — all have their place in the Nephandic arsenal. After all, the techniques that will seduce a greedy Sleeper simply won't do the trick when it comes to an apparently incorruptible Celestial Chorister.

Fear

Often, plain fear is all it takes to bring someone into the Nephandic fold. The process is simple enough. The Nephandus, along with whatever subordinates are at her disposal, hounds the target relentlessly. Threatening phone calls (and manifestations) are just the start. Soon the recruiter (usually an adsinistratus, or the equivalent thereof) ups the stakes. She approaches the target's associates and loved ones, just to let him know that she can hurt what's dear to him. Another favorite approach is to break into the target's home and leave evidence of the visit, so he knows that he's not safe anywhere. A dead dog in one's bed and blood in the

coffeepot are enough to let even the most oblivious soul know that home is no longer a refuge.

If the victim runs, the Nephandus follows him. If he stands his ground, she ups the ante. Sooner or later, the target inevitably breaks. And that is the precise moment when the Nephandus arrives, offering a deal — service in exchange for being left alone. Often the adsinistratus doesn't even let the target know she's behind his ordeal; she just wants to close the bargain. Often enough, she does.

This approach is not suitable for every victim, obviously. Some fight back, and others have allies at their disposal. Still, for the lonely, the weak and the dispossessed, threats are often good enough to do the trick. The ranks of the Nephandi and their servants are studded with those who were bullied into joining. However, few who are brought into the fold in this manner ever rise much in the Nephandic hierarchy. Cowards and fools can be bullied. Those with more promise require more effort.

Hostages

Not every threat a Nephandus levels against the object of her quest is against him directly. Snatching a loved one — children are preferred, when available — and then offering to trade the hostage's continued good health in exchange for service is a time-honored Nephandic technique. The victim is presented with evidence of the hostage's current health and peril, and informed that the hostage will stay healthy as long as the target does exactly what he's told. Nine times out of ten, the tasks laid before him serve no real purpose other than to sully his reputation and get him used to committing atrocities. Orders to commit theft or vandalism rapidly transform into demands for assault, murder and worse. But, with the hostage's safety in the balance, the target can do nothing but obey.

In many cases, once the victim is judged sufficiently tainted, the hostage is killed and the corpse mutilated for the new recruit's benefit. However, with his reputation savaged and even his former friends convinced that he's irredeemable, the target has nowhere else to go. Confronted with evidence that he's destroyed himself in vain, his options are death, self-destruction or damnation. More times than not, he chooses the last.

Other times, the target is brought face to face with the hostage (who has been carefully apprised of the target's current activities). This is done specifically so that the recruit can see the revulsion on the hostage's face at what he has become. Everything foul act that the target has performed has been for the benefit of the hostage, who now clearly wants nothing to do with the one who's sacrificed everything for him. With no place else to run, the target often just gives in and joins up.

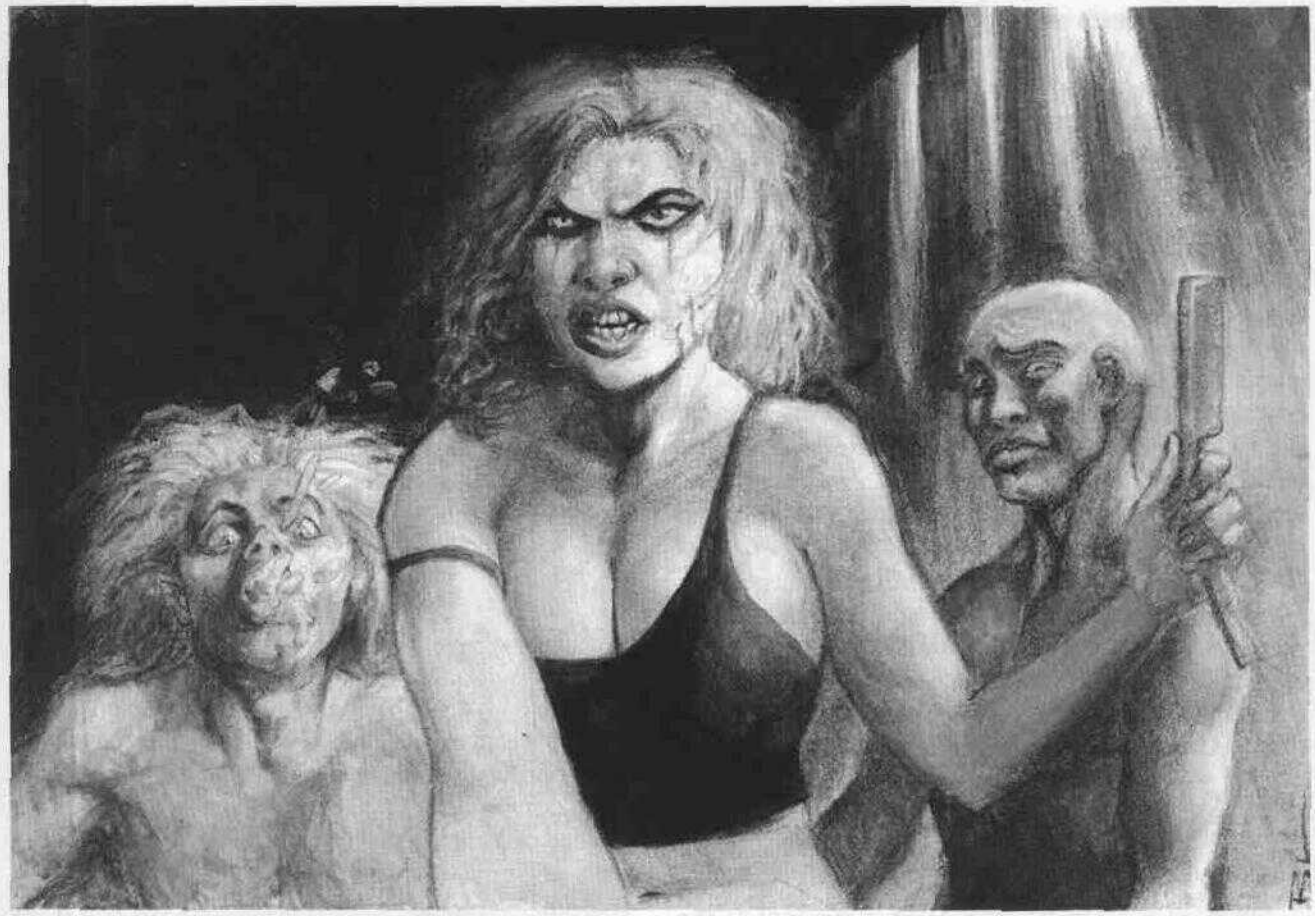
And if he takes his frustrations out on the hostage, then as far as the Nephandi are concerned, so much the better.

Seduction

As the saying goes, you get more flies with honey than with vinegar. The same principle applies, metaphorically speaking, to Nephandic recruits. Bribes and seductions work surprisingly well across the spectrum, from the lowliest pawn to the most potent magus. In many cases, the operation is a simple quid-pro-quo; "join us and you will receive this in return." Some Nephandic recruiters even approach their targets openly. Others use a minimal veil of subterfuge. For pawns, often promises of money and sex are enough. With the Awakened, things can get more complicated — knowledge, magical artifacts, instruction, positions within the chantry and so on are common coin in such transactions. Usually the Nephandus makes a great show of going back to his masters, begging one more favor for the recruit and so on — the process is much like the sale of a used car — when in actuality, in most cases the Nephandus will gladly meet almost any price. Souls, after all, are priceless. To bring in particularly prize recruits, such as chantry heads and the like, adsinistrati are often even willing to sacrifice themselves. The right new soul is worth that much.

Seduction can take other forms as well, and is often combined with blackmail. Whether it's a devoted wife maneuvered into an affair or an ethical scientist traduced into using unethical experimental techniques, in either case the Nephandus will cajole the target into doing something she'll later regret — and then threaten exposure if he doesn't get cooperation. Of course, the task the victim is blackmailed into doing is also blackmail-worthy, and inevitably documented by the Nephandus. The process spirals downward from there to its dreadful conclusion.

Then again, there's plain old addiction. Nephandi slip easily into the pusher's role, offering anything from booze to blow to sex. Anything that can serve to put a hook into a target is useful, and the Nephandi have sources for all of it. A mage who's hopelessly hooked on smack and has a shaytan for a connection is the same as one who's lost in a lascivious stupor in an adsinistratus' bed. The details are irrelevant. All that matters is that the target needs something, the Nephandus has it, and he can get the target to do anything for it. Even if the target manages to break free — unlikely as long as the recruiter is around — odds are that by the time she does



so, it's too late. The acts she's committed while in the throes of her vice weigh against her too heavily, and again, she's got nowhere else to go.

The Helping Hand and the Dagger in the Back

The best Nephandic recruiters are fond of a more artistic method of bringing in their targets. Relatively young and inexperienced mages and technocrats are most often taken in by this approach, but its deadly effectiveness remains undimmed no matter how many warnings are issued by stern-faced superiors.

An adsinistratus using this tack takes his time and scouts out a cabal before going into action. With a basic knowledge of their habits and tendencies in hand, he zeroes in on the weak link — the one who's feeling a little left out, or a little less powerful than the rest — and offers himself as a friend. He's the understanding listener, the shoulder to cry on and most of all, he's the mage's little secret. After all, if the mage tells the rest of her cabal about it, then he won't just be her friend any more, and she'll be back out in the social fringes.

Eventually, the Nephandus makes his move. He offers to help, to teach her or give her something that will make her other friends like her more. Thus the trap is set and baited, and when the mage accepts, the jaws snap shut. The help the Nephandus provides is inevitably tainted, designed to backfire and land the mage in more trouble than she started in. Furthermore, the method in which the "assistance" blows up is carefully designed to advertise the fact that the target has been consorting with Nephandi. As her other friends' distrust grows, she's got no one to turn to in order to set things right except the very one who's behind her troubles. If the Nephandus is clever, he'll play sympathetic, offer to help, and then promptly help his target dig herself in even deeper. The process repeats until there's no one else who'll listen to her, no one else she can turn to.

That precise moment is when he makes her an offer she can't refuse. And after she accepts, that's when he lets her former friends know how they were duped, and that there's still time to save her if they come after her.

At this moment, the Nephandus is, of course, lying. He is also, however, preparing. The fact that the cabal unwittingly drove their friend to going *barabbus* is a powerful psychological weapon, and he's not afraid to use it. Sooner or later, they all can fall. In many cases, the Nephandus targets a single mage and gets the whole cabal.

Such artistry is much admired among the adsinistrati, and there have been unofficial contests, with gilledian judges, to see who can seduce an entire cabal most artistically. The only losers in such events, unfortunately, are the poor souls who are used as the playing pieces.

Isolation

A similar, but slightly different technique is targeted at older, wiser and less trusting magi. The main thrust of this approach is to smear the mage-in-question's reputation until everyone around him believes that he is already in league with the Fallen. A steady campaign of planted evidence, bribed or coerced witnesses and the like can take years to bring to fruition, but the Nephandi are nothing if not patient. A whisper here, an altered memory there, and when the adsinistratus makes his move, suddenly there's a decade worth of "evidence" to call upon. Nothing will make mages turn faster than an accusation of Nephandic allegiance, and the accused may well find himself isolated by his so-called friends in a heartbeat once the call goes out. And if they believe him to be Nephandus, and turned on him that quickly anyway, he might as well make the deal.

So goes the logic in too many cases, while the Nephandi sit in their Labyrinths and laugh.

An Unholy Homecoming

Perhaps a more familiar Nephandic goal is the desire each Nephandus shares to open the doors of reality to his masters, so that the world will once again come under the domain of powers either infernal or ineffably evil. The various Nephandic sects are at odds as to which particular set of entities the gates should be opened for, however, as the K'llashaa have no wish to see the Lords of the Pit stake their claim to the Tellurian, while the Malfean Nephandi's ultimate ambition isn't particularly palatable to anyone.

As such, all three sects are in a mad rush to hasten the day of return. Signs and portents, not the least of which is the Red Star, have convinced them that the time is nearly upon them when their labors will bear fruit and inhuman footsteps will echo across the land once more. To that end, the Nephandi have grown bolder in their actions and more frantic in their sacrifices. After all, who cares about the consequences of getting caught by civil authorities when soon enough, civil authority won't matter any more? To ensure that the appropriate entities emerge when the ultimate gate is opened, all three sects have stepped up their activities and their offerings. More children are going missing, more ritualistic murders with "obvious occult significance that baffles police" are occurring and more Nephandic cults are finding willing followers — and victims.

Going After the Sleepers

Individualized recruitment is one thing. Subverting the whole damn world is another. The Nephandi, however, are interested in both. So while a single adsinistratus might spend years setting up a single Hermetic mage, another gets himself a seat on a corporation's board of directors, influences his peers, and slowly bends the corporation to the larger Nephandic agenda. Individual Sleepers might not be much as far as souls go, but the general psychic stink made by a disillusioned population laced with chemical additives and carcinogens, and bombarded with exhortations to senseless, ruinous consumerism, certainly makes the Nephandi's job easier. Whether or not they've succeeded is open to debate, but they're certainly enthusiastic about trying.

Why?

At first glance, helping relentless elder things back into the world so they can revel in destruction seems like a poor career choice. After all, regardless of whether it is incarnations of Hate and Pain or shapeless things spawned of darkness that overwhelm the Earth; neither seems to promise much of a future for anyone.

Some Nephandi, most prominently the K'llashaa, frankly don't care. They view themselves as instruments of their masters' will, tools to be used and thrown aside. If they fulfill their purpose and open the gate, they will be content to die. Most would regard it as a benediction to be slain first, to provide sustenance for their masters and to give them the strength to carry on their labors.

Others have more hopeful notions. Some claim that their masters will allow them to live on, to rule the surviving human population in a time of smoke and desolation. This train of thought is particularly favored among Infernalist Nephandi, who eagerly await the day they can serve their Princes' will on earth as governors of Hell's newest province.

Another notion, even more bizarre, holds that once the gate is opened, all of the Nephandic worshippers will be subsumed into their overlords, becoming part of the power and corruption. Thus, in some small way they shall live on and conquer. This is also roughly the philosophy of many of the Malfean Nephandi, who anticipate becoming part of archetypal foulness and despair. Needless to say, even the most suicidal K'llashaa finds this notion somewhat odd, and not a little off-putting.

Unanswered Prayers

In the wake of the titanic explosions and even more titanic storm that ripped through the Dark Umbra, many Nephandi are finding that their prayers, requests for power and assistance and other attempts to contact their dark overlords are being met with a deafening silence. Bereft Nephandi are going mad, being hunted down or quickly being hustled off for a modified sort of Rebirth, so as to pledge their souls elsewhere, but the fact remains that there are now vast metaphysical spaces where once monstrous things shambled and reached forth. The effect is not limited to any particular sect, though the K'llashaa have been hit hardest and the Malfean Nephandi the least. Still, every branch of the Nephandi has experienced some loss, and of late the sect has suffered a series of crushing losses in pitched battle.

The explanation for this is unknown to the Nephandi, and perhaps to any in the World of Darkness. The beings the Nephandi worship are not — and never have been — quite what they seem. Princes of Hell, Lords of the Outer Dark and more — all are themselves shadows of a darker, more awful power. Deep in the heart of the Dark Umbra, at the very core of the Labyrinth that surrounds the utter Void, dwell the nightmares of creation. These are the true Malfeans, the things that crawled forth from the Universe's mind and gnawed out that first Labyrinth, and for millennia they themselves have been sleeping. As they slept, they dreamt dreams of power, dreams that took the forms of demons and urges and other, less sightly things. Now some of those Malfeans have been awakened by a blast of nuclear fire. As they make the long climb toward wakefulness, their dreams fade, and those who depended on their dreams for power find themselves at their enemies' mercy.

Many among the Nephandi have decided that these absences are due to the so-called "War in Hell," and that the various Nephandic overlords are warring amongst themselves to see who will inherit the Earth as their rightful domain. While the adherents of this new philosophy have not as yet splintered into a distinct sect of their own, they are gaining momentum. And while their explanation is not necessarily the correct one, there's nothing that says the Lords of the Outer Dark and their ilk can't take a suggestion they like if they see one.

Rituals and Practices

The Nephandi have a whole range of rites, rituals and practices, all directed toward the goal of reopening the gates to the outside. The most important of these is sacrifice, and no Nephandic ritual proceeds without one such. While most sacrifices produce a negligible amount of Quintessence for those awaiting it Outside, the odd offering of a creature such as a vampire or the like can have remarkable results. Likewise, some Nephandi seem to have found a way to channel the pain and suffering endured by their sacrificial victims to their masters.

Certain of the Nephandic overlords have very specific tastes when it comes to sacrifice. They make their wishes (virgin men, white cats, second daughters of second sons and the like) known to their worshippers, and express their displeasure if those demands are not met. Generally the more potent the entity in question, the more rarefied its taste in offerings. The entities the K'llashaa worship, however, are much less discriminating. If it lives and bleeds, they want it.

The other touchstone of Nephandic practice is Summoning. In theory, Summoning is what the Nephandi are ultimately all about. Until such time as they work up sufficient reserves of energy to attempt to bring about their great work, however, they content themselves with smaller Summonings. Greater Summonings are the work of many lifetimes, requiring whole cities as sacrifices and blasphemies so intense as to make the skies howl. To date, none have succeeded, though rumors are spreading through the magical community that another attempt is in the making.

Lesser Summonings require somewhat less time and investment, and thus are invoked by the Nephandi on occasion when they seek supernatural assistance from their patrons. The beings brought forth by these rites tend to be of limited power, and some are unable to exist on Earth for very long. Still, even small Nephandic cults can bring forth a veritable horde of unholy allies in a pinch.

Litanies

Each Labyrinth, and indeed most Nephandic cults on Earth, has its own Litany. The Litanies are collections of prayers, rituals, invocations, incantations, Summonings and the like from which all rites and worship are extracted. In some cases, bits from these Litanies are extracted and turned loose on the Sleeper population, in the hope that a million repetitions of the chant will funnel a tiny bit of power elsewhere.

To most Nephandi, their particular Labyrinth's Litany is a combination grimoire and Bible. All other

Litanies are imperfect copies, to be plundered but never heeded. To the rest, each is part of a greater whole, which will only be realized when all of them are finally combined, labored over and unified into a purely truthful whole. Several of these Nephandic researchers have made it their life's work to wander from Labyrinth to Labyrinth, carefully correlating and cross-checking. At least one of the aswadim also shares in this labor, and at least two blasted and broken Labyrinths testify to his impatience with the reluctance of those who once dwelt there to share their secrets.

Nephandic Cults

Nephandic cults come in two flavors: Those formed by the Nephandi, and those formed of the Nephandi. The former are sincere organizations of worship, albeit the entities being worshipped are hardly recognizable to most Sleepers. The others are artificial constructs, built by the Nephandi deliberately to serve as a source of power, followers and camouflage. Both, however, ultimately serve Nephandic ends.

Cover cults are most frequently formed by Infernalist Malfeans, though the K'llashaa tend to attract their share of wide-eyed true believers looking for shortcuts to occult mastery. Infernalist cults generally have innocuous, vaguely ecumenical sounding names, and promise such airy-sounding benefits as "spiritual rebirth in a free-form worship group." Often, they borrow heavily from New Age terminology, and they follow such trends with expert ease.

The cults prey on the young and disaffected or rootless, with a branching sideline in middle-aged crisis sufferers. They rent small spaces in cities, hang out nondescript shingles, occasionally hang fliers to invite the community and keep low profiles otherwise. Behind closed doors, however, the Nephandus (usually an adsinistratus using the cult for a cover) milks the worshippers for all they are worth — financially, laborwise and in some cases, sexually. The errands the members run, ranging from selling flowers to going door-to-door and recruiting, are designed to wear down their resistance and prepare them for ever more degrading tasks. During this time, the Nephandus is carefully screening his flock, seeing who might be of more use later on. The rest is doomed to be cast off when the cult undergoes its final implosion into blood and death, which happens as soon as the cult leader decides there's no more use for it.

At this point, the group's practices, which until now have generally been benign (and a bit saccharine, in many cases), take a darker turn. Sacrifices work their way into the litany and the cult members are forced into deeper and deeper degradation. Eventually, it all ends in murder and another mysterious cult-slaying for police to puzzle over. Meanwhile, the adsinistratus and any of his followers whom he deemed useful lay low for a little while, then pop up in another city, with another cult idea and a little more power, money and malice.

Actual Nephandic cults are an entirely different kettle of foulness. Made up of true Nephandi and their devoted followers, these cults are dedicated to the greater tasks of the Nephandi. Their worship is directed, their sacrifices mandated by their otherwordly patrons. Nephandic cults of this sort do not advertise, nor do they overtly seek converts. They meet in desecrated and abandoned churches, in the middle of stinking swamps and in mansions guarded by private security and electrified gates. They are deadly serious, and their rituals involve blood and pain and death. There are no thrill-seeking dilettantes here; any who find the cult are either swiftly converted by shows of power or disposed of.

Nephandic cults tend to be small, with a relatively high percentage of Awakened. Worship occurs at regular intervals, though what those intervals are is left up to the individual cult. Malfean Nephandi tend to operate on a lunar cycle, for example, while their Infernalist brethren prefer something more astrologically complex. Services are kept on a need-to-know basis and can draw traveling Nephandi of a sympathetic persuasion from dozens of miles away. Victims for sacrifice are arranged for beforehand. Usually this is the duty of the most promising shaytans. If they succeed, this is noted. If they fail, often they vanish. The rites themselves are carried out with all due ceremony, with the ranking Nephandus presiding.

In the Labyrinths, the worship is even more complex, the sacrifices substantively greater and the number of worshippers increased. Usually a gilledean officiates, and the rituals can last for days or even weeks at a time. Unbound by the need to hide from mortal authorities and Awakened enemies, the rites blossom in ways unimaginable on Earth.

Each cult is devoted to one or more of the Nephandic patrons. Those who worship other entities are cautiously welcomed at the rites, though never in a position of authority. Ultimately, the work of the Nephandic cults is at the heart of what the Nephandi are trying to do, and as such they take it very seriously indeed.

Born Bad: Widderslainte

It was 3:17 AM when the baby monitor went off for the fourth time that night. "Honey?" was all Elise murmured before dropping back off to sleep.

"Don't worry, I've got it. I'm sure the twins are fine." Ron swung his feet onto the bedroom floor and cursed softly at the sudden cold. "Goddamn thing sends off a false alarm again, I'm taking it back in the morning." Mostly silent, he padded down the hall to the nursery and flicked on the light.

Stephen's crib was empty. Ron stifled a shriek and looked quickly at Jeremy's crib. Somehow, both babies were in there, nestled up next to one another. They looked adorable. How Stephen had managed that, Ron had no idea. But both babies were there, safe and sound. With a chuckle, he went to lift Stephen up, to put him back in his own crib, and then found himself screaming.

Stephen and Jeremy were huddled together, yes. Stephen's hands were clenched tight around his brother's still, cold throat, and he was smiling.

Widderslainte are mages whose avatars turned to the Nephandic affiliation in a previous life. In other words, they're born bad and get worse. Unawakened, they are bullies, sadists, manipulators and so forth. Once they come into their power, they're monsters. Unlike *barabbi*, widderslainte have spent their entire life (or, depending on how far back the Avatar was turned, lifetimes) preparing for their magical labors. They are a polished blade pointed at the heart of creation, and they like what they do very, very much.

The Un-Awakened

Pre-Awakening widderslainte are often troubled children. They may be very bright, but they rarely adjust well socially. The best are classic sociopaths, while the worst are often bundled off to reform schools or the equivalent. Fond of behaviors like torturing animals (and classmates), petty theft, vandalism, and rough, precocious sexual experimentation, widderslainte are unpleasant children who grow up to be thoroughly unpleasant adults.

Very few widderslainte have any conscious idea of the destiny that awaits them. They simply have a gaping hole in their psyches in the place where a so-called moral compass might go. Parents, teachers and social workers can (and often do) struggle valiantly to try to help nascent widderslainte to straighten up and fly right, but it's impossible. From birth — and possibly earlier than that — the tainted Avatar is already at work.

Data Points on the Curve

Not every juvenile widderslainte is also a juvenile delinquent. Some are model students and citizens—at least on the outside. They run straight A's in school, head clubs and other organizations, and otherwise present themselves as model citizens, even as they ruthlessly use and discard others on their climb to the top. Are they then any better than their fellows, who spend lunch hour tying stray cats into sacks and dumping them in rivers? Most assuredly not.

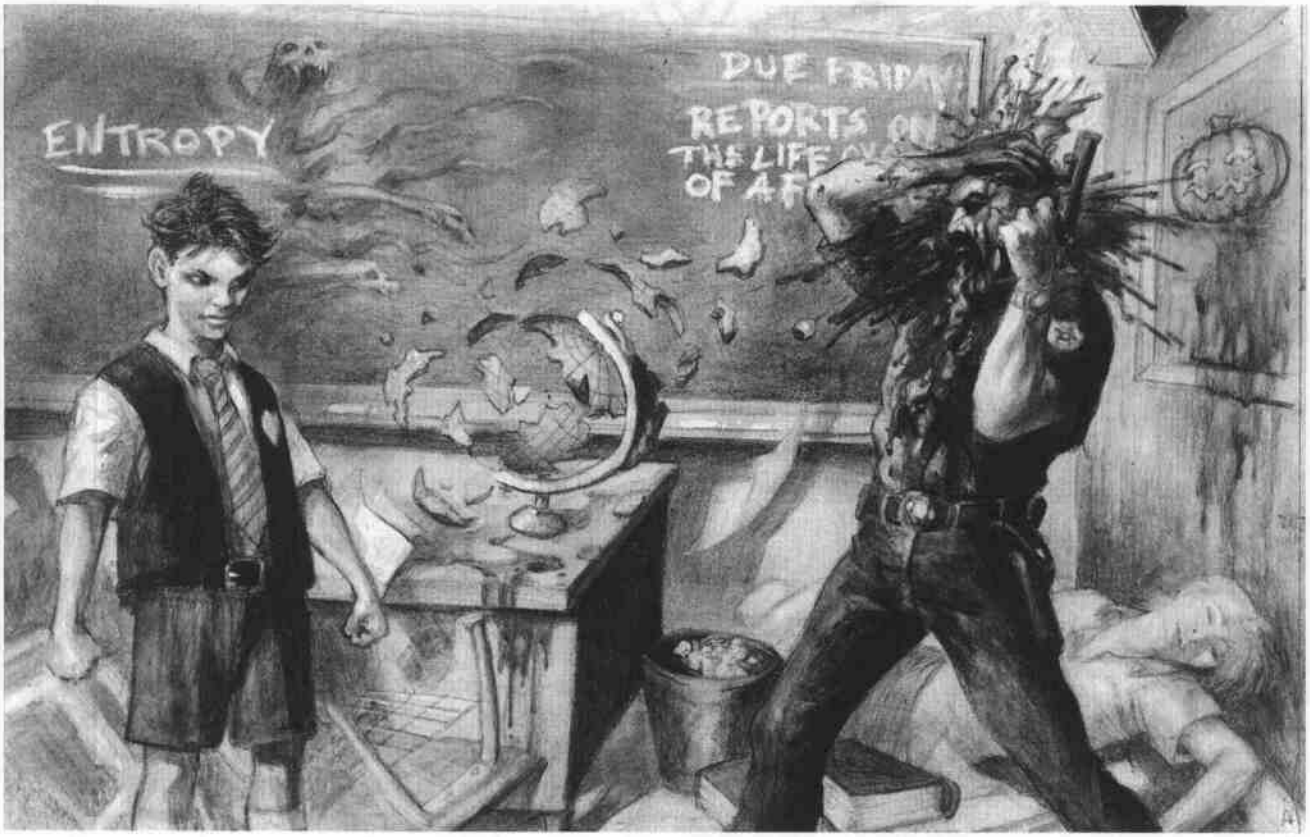
They're more subtle, true, but not really any different. It's just that the human wreckage they leave behind generally continues functioning, at least on some level.

If widderslainte were left alone to torment the world in mundane fashion, that would be bad enough, but they never are. Nephandi are constantly on the lookout for latent widderslainte, and will go to great lengths to bring them into the fold. Normally the target is receptive to these sorts of advances, but every so often, more drastic measures are required. It is not unknown for a promising young Nephandus to be kidnapped, or for her entire family to be slaughtered as cover for her disappearance. While the number of souls born thus is steadily increasing, widderslainte are still too valuable a resource to allow to be frittered away. Other Nephandi will do whatever is necessary to locate and retrieve budding young widderslainte. Indeed, there is a certain prestige attached to those *barabbi* and others who have the best knack for bringing in fresh recruits of this sort.

Regardless of details, the Nephandus who first make contact with a budding widderslainte do their best to trigger Awakening, and to explain who (and what) he is. Generally, this is done under circumstances that make it impossible for the subject of the Nephandus' attention to flee. For this reason, some Nephandi occasionally pose as child psychologists, the better to get multiple close looks at disturbed children whose Avatars might be very disturbed indeed.

Awakening

In general, Awakenings are triggered by some sort of life-altering trauma, and life-altering traumas are the sort of thing at which Nephandi excel. Once a potential widderslainte falls into their grasp, they make sure they've lined up whatever's necessary to



trigger an Awakening. (Note: While there is no surefire method of triggering Awakening, the Nephandi who specialize in this sort of thing do have a kind of knack for it. It's the sort of thing that makes Tradition mages very, very afraid.)

If the mentoring Nephandus is lucky enough to get control over his target, either by kidnapping or the consent of the victim, the procedure generally involves some form of torture. The torment can be physical or psychological, but it is extended and finely crafted. The stated goal, after all, is to get the target to use whatever power he possesses to make it stop. Only after physical and mental prowess have been proven to be useless is the widderslainte likely to be desperate enough to try to use magic. As little as possible is left to chance. Only after the victim is convinced that what is happening to him simply cannot be happening to him is he likely to Awaken.

Most Nephandi get can very creative indeed when it comes to bringing about this moment of actualization. Those who serve the Infernal powers are not above calling on their masters for assistance, though doing so is more difficult than it used to be. The K'llashaa used to rely heavily on outside help, but of late this tactic has failed frequently, resulting in multiple messily unsuccessful attempts to Awaken. Even without external aid, however, Nephandi are quite good at provoking the state of mind necessary to permit Awakening. Some Nephandi even maintain sites devoted specifically to this sort of activity, where the torment and Awakening of widderslainte can proceed without outside interference.

They'll Leave The Light On

The most notorious site dedicated to the Awakening of widderslainte is an unassuming little apartment building in the Lincoln Park section of Chicago. While not a Nephandic chantry per se, the Shuldiner Arms is maintained by and for Nephandi, either as a temporary residence or a workspace. The top floor of the six-story building is devoted to what can best be described as "artists' studios," though the art in question is the inflicting of pain. Insulated from outside interference by thick walls and magical protections, Nephandi are free to do whatever is necessary to get the results they need.

And if it doesn't work out, Lake Michigan is only a few blocks away.

Slipping Through the Cracks

While Nephandi are always on the lookout for potential widderslainte, a few manage to slip beneath the radar. These twisted souls Awaken on their own, and that can be a very bad thing. Solo widderslainte are prone to experimentation with their new abilities, piling sadistic attempt onto sadistic attempt in an effort to determine their limits. Often such lost souls burn out spectacularly, taking a great many others with them. Other times they manage to establish a sort of equilibrium, and hone their skills in solitary practice. These widderslainte, already fully functional by the time they meet their unholy brethren, tend to be very dangerous indeed.

A very small minority of widderslainte are found and taken in by Tradition mages who are either too kind for their own good or a bit over-anxious for allies. Such mages can be brought into a Tradition and, as long as no one in a position of authority takes a good look at them, spend a considerable time on the inside. Unfortunately, in such cases nature is stronger than nurture, and the widderslainte are never brought over to the Traditions' way of thinking. Instead, they pick up techniques, secrets and other useful information, but inevitably there comes a day when their true nature is revealed. Such widderslainte are incredibly dangerous to the Traditions, and are hunted down and killed whenever possible. They simply know too much to be allowed to live.

Failure

If the potential widderslainte fails to Awaken in timely fashion, the response of his would-be mentors is swift and ruthless. He's killed, the body is dumped, and the process of waiting for that particular Avatar to cycle through again begins. Un-Awakened henchmen are a dime a dozen, after all, but a tainted Avatar is a rare and valuable resource. It's worth far more to the Nephandi being reborn and hopefully Awakening in a few short decades than it is inhabiting a vicious, but otherwise normal human being.

There's a belief among Nephandi with this duty that a particularly painful death in this life leads to an easier Awakening in the next one. As a result, the disposal of failed widderslainte is often accompanied by extended, clinically precise torture. There's no hard data to support this particular hypothesis, but that doesn't slow its practitioners down one bit.

Widderslainte and Barabbi

In theory, the only hierarchy the Nephandi have is a hierarchy of power. Whether an avatar is pre-conditioned or converted should make no difference whatsoever. However, that's theory; fact is somewhat different.

A Favorite Tactic

Many Tradition and Convention mages fail to understand the true nature of the widderslainte condition. They may have heard about these twisted souls, but deep down, they don't believe it. They're sure that with enough therapy or reconditioning or spiritual cleansing or whatever, the psychic taint can be cleansed, and the widderslainte who really wants to can be made a useful member of magical society.

Technically, this approach to dealing with widderslainte is known as "suicide." Mages born with inverted Avatars have absolutely no compunction about using their enemies' weaknesses against them, and in dealing with widderslainte compassion is definitely a weakness. There have been too many cases where a cabal on the verge of destroying a Nephandus was sweet-talked into showing pity because their would-be target "had been raised wrong" or "had never been shown what being good could be like." Showing mercy in circumstances like these is inevitably repaid with blood and treachery. Widderslainte cannot be redeemed by anything short of an Oracle or Archmaster, and maybe not by them, but there's always another sucker willing to try.

For that, the widderslainte and their hungry masters are quite thankful.

Whenever possible, widderslainte associate with their own kind rather than with *barabbi*. Widderslainte regard their Avatars as somehow purer than those of *barabbi*. After all, those haven't been through the purifying process of reincarnation, sloughing off any Ascenscion-oriented dross along the way. *Barabbi*, in turn, regard widderslainte as effete snobs who got in the easy way, and who haven't suffered nearly enough for the airs that they put on.

While it's rare for Nephandi to turn on one another while there's still work to do — they're still far too thin on the ground to throw away allies for the crime of having the wrong sort of Avatar — there's certainly no shortage of internecine conflict. The Nephandi want to drag all of creation screaming into the pit, but that doesn't mean that they won't gladly help some of their own get there first.

All other things being equal, when there are two Nephandi of equivalent power, the widderslainte is the one who runs the show. The indefinable quality of having been born to the work generally works in a

widderslainte's favor. The fact that they're experienced, ruthless bastards doesn't hurt, either.

Tainted Avatars

The very definition of the widderslainte is tied to her Avatar. It is the corrupt Avatar's essence, after all, that taints the widderslainte's soul from the get-go. Thus, it makes sense that just as normal Avatars have archetypes, so to do tainted ones. They include:

Destruction (Dynamic)

Destruction Essences are devoted to releasing the energy in all things. Static patterns are merely fireballs and explosions waiting to happen. A Destruction Essence pushes the widderslainte inevitably to tear down order, to smash patterns and to tumble structures. A mage with this essence is prone to a series of short, sudden adventures, each targeting something that inevitably comes crashing down. Widderslainte with this sort of Avatar are short-tempered, headstrong and prone to sweeping gestures. Their magical styles are often flashy but effective, and they frequently run the risk of Paradox backlash.

Frozen (Pattern)

Frozen Essences are drawn to a perfect, motionless harmony utterly devoid of any sort of dynamism whatsoever. The Void is the ideal they serve, and they strive to cultivate it within themselves. They prefer dead systems, dissecting magic the way a high school student might dissect a frog. They abhor wildness in all its forms, and devote themselves to reining in and breaking that sort of dynamic chaos. Frozen Avatars belong to plotters and planners, those widderslainte with long-term goals and the patience to achieve them. Mages with this sort of Avatar are cold, deliberate and patient, and often give even their fellow widderslainte the creeps. Their magical styles are subtle and swift, and they rarely invest in visible effects when they can avoid it.

Chaotic (Primordial)

A Chaotic Essence has no interest in anything remaining the way it is. If it's broken, the mission is to repair it — just in time to smash it to flinders. All systems are bad and need to be destroyed, all order must be subverted, and wherever there are two bricks on top of one another, they need to be knocked down. Chaotic essences generally produce mercurial personalities, childlike one moment and monstrous the next. There is a higher percentage of mental disorder among widderslainte with this sort of avatar than any other, and such Nephandi are generally poor at planning, long-term action or anything other than spur-of-the-moment action.

Tormented (Questing)

It is said that Tormented Essence indicates an avatar that belonged to a recently turned *barabbus* who regretted the decision in life. Regardless of whether this romantic notion is true or not, a Tormented Essence drives its possessor from place to place and home to home. None can explain the source of their incurable wanderlust, nor do any of them know what might finally slake it. They just know that they are driven to go from place to place, bringing ruin wherever they go. These are the dreamers, if they can be called such, of the widderslainte, the ones who quest after something greater than the destruction they can cause on their own. Fortunately, they don't always find it.

St. Gysrg's School

Tucked in the countryside near Bern, Switzerland is an exclusive boys' school called St. Gysrg's. The school has been in operation continuously for over three centuries, and its alumni include some of Europe's most notable politicians, financiers and rakehells. Students endure a rigorous physical and academic course of study during their stay at the school, and are allowed home only for brief interludes in the dead of winter and the middle of summer. Parents of St. Gysrg's students and alumni alike praise the high academic standards, the rigid devotion to learning, and the school's strong religious emphasis. Indeed, several of the teachers are monks, and the Passion Play put on by the student body at Yuletide is something of a major event, though on occasion local bishops have questioned the over-enthusiastic directorial interpretation.

St. Gysrg's also maintains a discreet scholarship fund for underprivileged students of great promise, who are often plucked from as far away as America or New Zealand. That generosity has won St. Gysrg's much public acclaim, though on rare occasions the gentry have threatened to pull their children out of the school rather than let them rub elbows with the hoi polloi. However, such protests are quickly soothed by discreet talks with the headmaster, Simon Edel, and many of the same parents who have fussed over the issue have later made sizeable contributions to the fund.

St. Gysrg's alumni are relatively few in number — the average graduating class numbers less than 30 — but they almost inevitably rise to the top of their respective professions. Politics, finance, the diplomatic corps of a dozen countries across Europe — all of these list graduates of the school among their brightest lights. The school opens doors for its underprivileged students as well, and not a few of them have gone on to the same dizzying professional heights as their wealthier class-

mates. However, there is a very high failure rate at the school. Children of privilege who fail out are returned home in disgrace, or discreetly steered to less rigorous schools. Scholarship students who don't make the cut are presumably returned to their humble origins, never to be heard from again. Those who endure simply assume that their former classmates are simply too embarrassed to keep in touch. They couldn't be more wrong.

In truth, St. Gysrg's has an extensive extracurricular course of study in Nephandic approaches to magic and the Qlippothic Spheres. Most of this is reserved for the scholarship students — in reality, widderslainte who have been located and gathered in so that the process of Awakening can be expedited. Occasionally, one of the paying customers shows promise as well, but not often. Young widderslainte who are brought to the school are trained in the theory and practice of magic, as well as their unique theology and the details of the *Ascension War*. They are also encouraged to make friends or otherwise get their hooks into their fellow students by whatever means necessary, as most of them have the potential to be useful down the road. In the meantime, the half-dozen Nephandi on staff do their best to train their charges, and to scour the student body at large for other glimmerings of magical talent.

The school itself is set in a series of ancient stone buildings that Edel claims was once a Cluniac monastery. There are no records of a monastery on the site in question, but no observer can deny the religious severity of the architecture. The campus is guarded by forces both temporal and magical. After all, with the children of Europe's elite in attendance, the school would seem a perfect target for kidnappers. However, Edel has installed top-notch security, and seen to it that his more shadowy staff members take care of the eldritch side of things. Indeed, the situation plays right into the Nephandi's hands. Any attempt to infiltrate the compound will no doubt appear to be an attempt to kidnap or murder the students. As such, the intruders — even if they are well-meaning mages attempting to free Europe's leaders from the clutches of the Nephandic cabal who controls the school — are going to be met with deadly force both early and often.

Edel is himself a powerful *barabbus*, and his feelings for the widderslainte he harvests can best be described as unhealthy envy. He is completely a servant of the higher goal, however, and has no compunctions about doing whatever is necessary to get his charges home. (In one instance, he torched a rival boarding school's dormitory to demonstrate how "unsafe" the institution was. Over 20 students were trapped inside the burning building, thanks to some more of Edel's intervention, and were burned to death. No evidence of Edel's involvement was ever found by the secular authorities, however, and the next day, the widderslainte's parents agreed to send their son to St. Gysrg's.)

The Qlippothic Spheres

Everything in Creation has its dark reflection. While not precisely true, this logic holds firm when it comes to the Spheres of magic. Each has a fractured, negative aspect referred to as its Qlippothic side, and it is these Qlippothich Spheres that the Nephandi draw upon when it comes to the Spheres of magic.

Nephandic magic is based not on alteration, but on negation. Sphere magic is inclusive, Qlippothic exclusive. It is the practice of drawing on the places where Creation breaks down, and attempting to widen those cracks further.

Nephandi do not seek to alter reality or to add to it, but rather to destroy it. Each act of magic they work is an attempt to feed more of Creation to their dark masters. Some Nephandi believe that if they can simply use magic on enough of reality, a certain critical mass will be reached and the rest will slide into the Abyss. While this is a minority position, there is no denying that the Resonance of Nephandic magic bears with it a faint charnel whiff of the pit, and the cold of the lightless void beyond the stars.

Because their magic works against reality, Nephandi have a particular problem with Paradox. Those who are not already gifted with inhuman adornments during Rebirth often acquire them from Paradox backlash. It would seem that in its dim, slow way even Creation itself is aware of what the Nephandi are trying to do, and subconsciously reacts against it. (Kind and generous Storytellers might handicap Nephandi by causing any Qlipphothic effect, even if coincidental, to garner one point of Paradox, even if it would otherwise be free. This also puts Nephandi in a habit of being particularly careful and subtle about their magic use.)

The Spheres Themselves

In a practical sense, Nephandic magic is an inversion of Traditional magic. The approaches and techniques work, more or less — they've just been

turned on their collective head. The Spheres are still called upon, it's just that now the Nephandus is calling on the Qlippothic Spheres. As a result, Nephandic magic tends to take a darker, more brutal tone than its mirror opposite....

Qlippothic Correspondence

Correspondence is based on the integral connectedness of all things. Qlippothic Correspondence acknowledges that, and extrapolates that logic to note that if one thing is destroyed, then all things are touched by that destruction. Magics that call upon this Sphere seek to leapfrog decay from one thing to the next, and by destroying one aspect of Reality, to weaken all the rest.

A use of Qlippothic Correspondence typically results in the Nephandus tearing a chunk out of spatial reality or even destroying the space between two things. By magically devouring a space, the Nephandus can step across the now non-existent gap with ease. Such manifestations often resemble gaping wounds in the air with ragged edges, or sudden disappearances of the Nephandus into a narrow vortex, sucked away like a person sucked into a high-power vacuum.

Qlippothic Entropy

Entropy, to the Awakend magician, is the inexorability of process and the mechanism of chance. To the Nephandus, it is the inevitability of decay and the mechanism of bad luck. Entropy is perhaps the favorite Sphere of Nephandi, and they use it gleefully in its most destructive aspects.

Entropic Resonance naturally taints whatever the Nephandi do, and most Nephandi have at least a rudimentary understanding of Qlippothic Entropy. The usual use of the Sphere of Entropy is a focus of renewal, though. Qlippothic Entropy makes no such conceits — it is raw, unadulterated destruction. Through the use of this Sphere a Nephandus eradicates people, disintegrates structures and even consigns ideas and hopes to oblivion. It's the spread of nonexistence, as the things destroyed leave neither room nor seed behind for a new flourishing — only a bitter void bereft of any hope at new creation.

Qlippothic Forces

If Forces is the manifestation of energy and power, Qlippothic Forces is instead a reversal of that. It is the cold that kills flame, the silence that swallows thunder and the deadly grasp of the whirlpool.

Nephandi naturally excel at defenses against conventional Forces. Technocratic weapons and Traditionalist supernatural channeling alike are drained away and deadened through the Nephandic application of the Sphere. Additionally, this affinity gives Nephandi a tendency to rely on effects that conceal or distort — a Nephandus is often quite skilled in the use of rotes that cause invisibility (by warping light), flight (by denying gravity) or paralysis (by absorbing kinesis). Furthermore, some Nephandi have an uncanny knack for *attacking* with negated Forces, using empowered bolts of darkness, zones of stillness that halt even the motion of the body's rhythms or utter, bone-chilling absolute cold.

Qlippothic Life

Qlippothic Sphere of Life is growth gone horribly wrong. It embodies cancerous growth and parasitism. The fecundity it encourages is vibrantly sick, pregnant with half-formed monstrosities and self-strangling overabundance. Qlippothic Life magics are the magics of plague and parasite, of the strangling vine and the rotting fungus, and they feed on true Life magics the way a tick draws blood from its host.

Researchers familiar with the Nephandi argue that Qlippothic Life magic stems from the very dark masters of the Nephandi themselves — that such beings, desirous of the end to all Creation, see every living, growing thing as a malignant cancer to be malformed and eventually snuffed. In parasitic fashion, creations of Qlippothic Life tend to feed upon other natural living things and grow in deformed fashion until they have sucked all natural life from the area, then sending themselves into starvation and death. Nephandic creations of Life rarely resemble anything of the mundane world — rather, a Nephandus is likely to grant someone a malignant tumor that feeds the body with powerful stimulants but also consumes nourishment from the blood, or even to leave behind small parasitic beings that wait, hibernating, in hard outer shells, only to unroll and attach themselves when a new host presents itself.

Qlippothic Matter

The dark version of the Sphere of Matter is associated with, as one mage put it, "taking big realities and breaking them into small ones." Qlippothic Matter is the magic of tearing things apart and reducing them to their components. It can create, but its creations are broken, lopsided things. Often, such creations come much as the proverbial statue formed of a whole rock — the Nephandus whittles away at Creation, destroying pieces and bits until all that's left is the desired end.

Nephandi who use Qlippothic Matter tend to be fond of powerful, massive effects, like using a ritual to burrow out a new Labyrinthine tunnel or creating whole statues in honor of their dark deities. Fool's gold — the creation of matter that resembles one thing but

is actually something else — is also a favorite pastime; a Nephandus without the skill to create, say, diamonds could still make something that resembles a diamond (the better to reel in foolish Sleeper confederates).

Qlippothic Mind

The Qlippothic Sphere of Mind seeks a negation of all self and consciousness, and not in a good way. Manifestations of this Sphere eradicate conscious thought and identity and break down barriers of personality. Qlippothic Mind is also the magic of violating the sentience of others, of plundering memories and creating tabulae rasae.

Many mages don't realize exactly how devastating the Qlippothic Sphere of Mind is until experiencing it. Qlippothic Mind effects specialize in excising thought, will and emotion. Often, would-be do-gooders who assault a labyrinth find themselves questioning their actions, confused, disheartened, squabbling with former friends and otherwise totally demoralized. Qlippothic Mind magic achieves all of these aims: Emotions and the ties they foster are deadened; plans are muddled and wiped away; free will and the drive to pursue aims are eroded. Ultimately, some Nephandic pawns become nothing more than hollow, near-mindless shells with only enough presence to follow the directions given them.

Qlippothic Prime

Prime may be the raw stuff of Creation, but Qlippothic Prime is the pure matter of destruction. It is the unbridled power of negation, the absence of Prime (or God, depending upon whom you ask), and its use is like the touch of the Void.

A Nephandus' use of Qlippothic Prime can accomplish many of the same feats as normal Prime magic — negation can fuel Pattern-destructive attacks, and Nephandi can easily siphon away Quintessence from places or things of power. More dangerously, Nephandic Prime attacks can eat away at the very Avatar of the mage. While Gilgul remains only the purview of Masters and Archmasters, a Nephandus with sufficient Prime to tear Quintessence out of an item can similarly tear it from a personal Pattern — the Nephandus can actually violate the sanctity of a mage's Avatar and draw out personal Quintessence.

Fortunately, Nephandic manipulations of Prime tend to be inefficient. Nephandi who handle Quintessence often drain away a sizeable portion of it without net effect — whether pulling from a Node or from Tass, a Nephandus usually only garners half the power of an uncorrupted mage.

Qlippothic Spirit

Qlippothic Spirit is not about the delicate balance between material and spiritual worlds. Instead, it is concerned with the breaking of the ephemeral to one's will and the desecration of the purely spiritual. Qlippothic Spirit magic is all about binding and forcing spirits, with forcible possession a particular favorite.

The greatest threat of Qlippothic Spirit, of course, is the threat of destruction. Having gone through the Cauls, most Nephandi find the Avatar Storm a joke. A Nephandus can force compliance from many a spirit simply with the threat of crossing into the Umbra and draining away its spirit essence for all time — in effect, utterly destroying it. Spiritual wards and devices often focus on similar aims: The Nephandus builds wards that drain away any ephemera in contact with the magic, thereby forcing spirits into specific boundaries and patterns. While not all spirits have a sense of self-preservation, many intelligent or dedicated ones realize the very permanent danger that a Nephandus presents.

And, of course, with enough time and effort, a Nephandus can slowly reshape a spirit's motives and nature so that it, too, becomes an entity of negation and a willing servant....

Qlippothic Time

While the phrase "Qlippothic Time" sounds like a bad joke, its effects are anything but. The dark reflection of the Time Sphere is the magic of jagged dissolution and sharp edges of time, of places where the natural flow of events breaks down. Initiates of this Sphere can pull victims out of time or speed their personal time up, or flit through time's broken places, to wreak as much havoc as they may.

Stories relate Nephandi vanishing at the moment of defeat or suddenly appearing over a now-cooling corpse of an adversary. The Qlippothic Sphere of Time is, literally, the End of All Things: it is the terminus, the final end of the universe when no more time exists. Mages trapped in labyrinths often relate that they lost all sense of time, even magically, as if the place had been shunted outside the passage of seconds. Powerful Nephandi favor crafting their own places outside the boundaries of time, where cause and effect break down and only the whims of the owner dictate the influence of the clock. Such places are, of course, dreadfully disorienting. Some mages also report visions of their own past or future terrors, coming together in a dreadful cacophony, as if the mage died and flashed all of the worst elements of her life at once.

Rotes and Resonance

Nephandi, particularly *barabbi*, are surprised to find that their old rituals and approaches to magic still work once they go through the Cauls. What is not the same, however, is the effect of a well-trusted rote. Each use of magic now takes on a particularly Qlippothic flair. With effort, a Nephandus can make this effect less obvious, but she can never erase it completely.

A Nephandus *always* generates at least a small amount of Qlippothic Resonance in any magical working. This can, of course, be sucked away and countered with Prime and Mind magic — assuming that the Nephandus is skilled enough, and has enough time, to do so. Inexperienced mages may not recognize this Resonance for what it is, but it's always distinctly uncomfortable. Nephandi of middle ranks who still go about the business of recruitment, but aren't so twisted as to make human interaction impossible, must therefore rely on specialized rotes to cover their own decrepitude, lest they give away their presence. Newly-turned *barabbi* rarely bother, until they realize that the Resonance is a give-away, and old, experienced Nephandi frankly have little to fear from giving off a little necrosis and similarly don't deign to cover their Resonance.

Labyrinths

Wherever they can, the Nephandi build for themselves massive, hideous Labyrinths. These edifices serve as both dwelling place and sanctuary, for the entire site is designed and constructed to focus the specific flavor of corruption the local Nephandi prefer. In essence, the Labyrinth is a hellish city, designed to please its masters, pleasure its inhabitants and torment its prisoners.

On Earth, the Nephandi are circumspect. A Nephandus' lair is rarely large, as most Adsinistrati work alone or let their pawns find their own lodging. Nephandi working with organized cults, however, often move into some sort of communal arrangement. Once the Nephandus finds himself in power over Sleepers — or in a clearly defined place in the local hierarchy — then his new circumstance dictates what becomes of his lair.

The Nephandus must always balance safety with the need to keep a low profile; the place must be made secure, but too much Nephandic resonance will inevitably alert the local magical community to its presence. In the end, most Nephandi resort to leaving the place bristling with subtle traps, magical and otherwise.

A particularly clever Nephandus will, if not living in isolation, go out of her way to make her neighbors like her, which means that when the cabal of Tradition mages inevitably comes crashing in the window, they get the police called on them instantly. Magical wards are one thing; having friendly eyes on your apartment round the clock is another.

Malfean Nephandi and K'llashaa prefer more solitude. Slums, abandoned and condemned buildings and abandoned tunnels or bomb shelters are more to their taste, the better to hide the evidence of their work. Such dens are more openly armed and defended, in large part because there's less chance of anyone accidentally stumbling across them. Most lairs of this sort have some sort of ossuary or charnel pit nearby, where the Nephandus can dispose of his sacrifices, and an altar as well. Often the place sticks of rotting meat and old blood, and more of them are discovered by stench than by Resonance. In the case of a Malfean Nephandus, there is usually some sort of holding pen for his "pets" and creations. In most cases, this is the first area an intruder stumbles upon, and the results are generally bone-crunchingly tragic.

Unlike Infernalist Nephandi, members of the other two sects tend to travel light. They, more than Infernalists, pack up and move frequently, leaving behind a trail of victims and abandoned lairs. Infernalists tend to be more settled, better camoflauged and more thoroughly devoted to long-term plans. An Infernal Nephandus' library is important to him, as are his tools of ritual and suchlike, and as such Nephandi of that affiliation tend to be slightly slower to abandon their dens and start over.

There is a defensive aspect to the Labyrinths as well, as the Nephandi have learned the lesson of 1945 well. Each maze is studded with traps and magical defenses, all designed to inflict lethal damage in as horrifying and efficient a manner as possible. The exact nature of these defenses depends on the whims and taste of the gilledean in residence. Devices involving barbs, thorns, acid and flesh-devouring insects are particular favorites. The idea is to make any assault on a Labyrinth tantamount to suicide, and in the last half-century this notion has been put into practice very, very effectively.

The decor can be literally anything imaginable, and a few things that aren't. Anything from walls of shimmering, broken glass to corridors of living flesh to carpets of slaves chained to the floor so that visitors might walk upon them can be found in a Labyrinth. The only limitation is the taste of the gilledean who rules the edifice, along with his imagination for malice. Common features include torture gardens, gallows from which broken prisoners dangle and keep watch, arenas wherein the Nephandi can sponsor gladitorial games and blasphemous spectacles, and vast libraries of occult knowledge absent from Earth for centuries.

Living quarters within a Labyrinth depend on station. Generally the gilledean who oversees the Labyrinth has the largest and most opulent quarters, often near the Caul (if one is present). As rank descends, so too does the size and location of the Nephandus' quarters. Usually, whatever pawns are present are housed in vast barracks. The rewards of rank and privilege are frequently paraded in front of them, however, to encourage them to attempt to claw their way up the ladder. Often, the location of one's quarters is an important political tool in the never-ending games played beyond the Horizon. A Nephandus whose rooms are distant from the central libraries, arenas and such is at a severe disadvantage. If the disadvantageous location is coupled with a proximity to a Labyrinth feature of particular foulness, such as a pit of festering flesh or the like, the unlucky Nephandus can find himself shunned by even his peers, and effectively eclipsed in the race for status and power.

Dens of Iniquity

Labyrinths built by Malfean Nephandi are usually constructed along some sort of spiral, while Infernalist Nephandi prefer massive, monolithic but ultimately orderly structures, and the K'llashaa build structures that are beyond both belief and comprehension. Also common are magical laboratories, slave pits and holding pens for the various entities that the residents have summoned.

Form and Function

Form inevitably follows function when it comes to home territory for the Nephandi, and that means that their lairs are always difficult to find, dangerous to approach and deadly to the unwary. A Labyrinth is designed to house, protect and fulfill the needs of its resident Nephandi. Within its walls are chambers wherein the Nephandi and their servants dwell, unholy sanctuaries, meeting halls, dungeons and torture chambers, vast storerooms and tiny oubliettes and all manner of other amenities and necessities.

Ancient Ruins

The vast majority of Nephandi were driven beyond the Horizon in 1945, leaving behind centuries of effort in their haste to flee. All over the world, the structures those Fallen had constructed were abandoned and lost to time. Tradition and Convention mages discovered and put to the torch a few, but most were never found.

With their owners gone, these Labyrinths have fallen into disrepair. Their guardian creatures have escaped, their defensive magics dissipated — more or less. Hidden in jungles and other inhospitable places, these ancient hives of evil still house all manner of foulness that an unwary or overly curious cabal might stumble across.

And just to make things worse, one by one, the original owners are starting to come back.

Storm Winds Blowing

As potent as the defenses of the Labyrinths are, many were no match for the sheer unadulterated power of the Sixth Great Maelstrom. Explorers beyond the Horizon have found shards of Labyrinths, broken and spinning in the endless void. Some have simply been shattered, others scoured down to the very living rock by the storm winds. Some simply vanished.

Most of the Labyrinths did survive the storm, albeit heavily damaged. The Maelstrom itself has retreated to the confines of the Underworld, and only occasionally spawns squalls that reach out beyond that. The Labyrinths that survived are now safe from the storm's wrath. However, more than a few did succumb, and whether anything of value remains in their corpses — or whether anyone survived — remains an open question.

One disturbing trend that the few explorers have noted is the tendency for all of the Labyrinths in the material world to have a gate or Shallowing that leads straight into the Tempest of the Underworld. It seems that in many cases, Nephandic Labyrinths owe their construction to *the* Labyrinth of the dead....

No two Labyrinths are ever built along the same lines, and all have some manner of maze-like feature to their construction. Whether this is done by design, to frustrate attackers and confuse prisoners, or in unconscious imitation of the great Labyrinth of the Dark Umbra is irrelevant. While exploration might be worthwhile — many objects of power were left behind when the Nephandi fled — the risks taken by any explorers of these Labyrinths are sizeable. The fact remains that while those who dwell there are intimately familiar with each twist and turn, outsiders wandering into a Labyrinth are soon hopelessly, irrevocably lost.

The scales of the manifold Labyrinths vary. Some are the size of a few city blocks; others can be literally miles across. Each is ruled by a gilledean or the equivalent, though the similarities end there. In populated areas, the external appearances of Labyrinths are usually calculated to blend into their surroundings in shape or form. Elsewhere things are different, as in locales not directly under the Technocratic thumb there's plenty of room to erect architectural monstrosities. One thing remains constant, however, regardless of where a Nephandic lair is located: the fact that regardless of scale or construction, the entire site is devoted to and reeks of evil.

The Caul

The heart of madness for any key Nephandic labyrinth is the Caul. It's in the Caul that a mage becomes *barabbus*, turned about and made into one of the Fallen. It's at the Caul that the Nephandi gather for their most potent workings. The Caul is, in essence, a tear in the fabric of space that connects to the places where Things dwell. The sorts of Things that the Nephandi revere live beyond that fleshy, pulsing portal.

Not all labyrinths have a Caul — but all important ones do. Cauls are as likely found in an Umbral piece of the labyrinth as in the material world; they all ultimately lead to the same place — somewhere deep in the primordial labyrinth that reflects into the creation of all Nephandic mazes.

A new recruit must eventually go through the Caul. The subject enters and there is judged by the Things that dwell on the other side. If the subject is found acceptable, then he returns... eventually... with Avatar inverted, forever blackened. If the subject is unacceptable — or the Things are simply hungry, or bored, or whimsical — then there may be little more than a crunch of the Caul closing in a spasm and perhaps a bit of blood or viscera. Sometimes nothing comes back at all, ever.

Nephandi, by tradition, don't speak of their personal experiences on the other side.

An unwilling victim hurled into a Caul lands without fanfare on a wet, soft surface. As eyes adjust to the dimness, it becomes clear that the victim is in a chamber of sorts, a diseased womb with dripping walls interlaced with spun crystalline fibers and cancerous fleshy surfaces.

The whole of the chamber often has a very slight illumination — most often red or purplish. Then the fun begins.

Once stranded in the chamber, a victim finds that the Caul is closed. Then the Things begin their work. Creatures boil out of the walls and from sphincters that open long enough to expel them in a wet and stringy mass. These creatures are often reflections of the Things that wait in the uttermost pits of the Underworld's Labyrinth — tainted, of course, by the visitor's personal demons and fears.

A victim who steps away or tries to step back through the Caul is rent limb from limb and devoured.

A victim who steps *to* the creatures in violation of all instinct and sense has chosen the Reversed Path and is judged. A good portion of such victims are also rent limb from limb and devoured. Those of strong will and dark heart may be conveyed by the creatures to the presence of a Thing, there to make the final transformation.

A victim who *stands still* and makes no choice, neither back nor forward, cannot be touched. The creatures will circle about, howl, wail and wait for a decision. Until the individual makes that decision of his own will, though, the Caul waits.

Heroic Rescue!

Yes, it's possible to rescue someone from the Caul. If the individual stands ground and does not move, then the victim cannot be touched — at least, unless another Nephandus enters and does some wetwork, or one of the Things becomes curious enough to investigate the delay.

A group of determined willworkers could force open the Caul and send in a magicked lifeline to extract a hapless victim — but the perils are many. The mages would, of course, have to defeat the Nephandi and all of their servants; violation of the Caul would draw out every last twisted defender. And the victim would have to know enough about the Cauls to realize that *refusing to accept or fear evil* is the only choice that might save him — something very, very few mages would realize, because such knowledge could only be garnered from those who've already been in the Cauls themselves.

Books from the Abyss

"Doesn't look like much, does it?" Devin held a small, leatherbound book in his hands and made an exaggerated show of blowing dust from it. "From all the screaming we got from Magister Lewes, you'd think the thing would be nine feet tall and written in blood."

Sheldon put his feet on his desk and snorted. "Yeah, right. What is that thing, anyway? It looks like an old copy of Ethan Frome."

"Ah, there's the beauty of it, my dear Watson." Devin stood and presented the book to his friend. "This humble tome, whose looks are so unassuming, is in fact the dreaded, the dreadful, the utterly abominable Malleus Nefandorum!"

Sheldon blinked. "No shit?"

"No shit."

"Damn. How'd you get it? And don't give me any of this 'I have mighty scrounge fu' crap you always do."

Devin grinned. "Friends in low places. I've got a buddy named Sabine who works in an antiquarian bookstore. She made a few calls and dug it up for me."

With a low whistle, Sheldon sat up. "I'm impressed. And is it real?"

"As real as it can be, though that's not saying much." Devin dropped it on the desk, where his friend immediately started paging through it. "The rumors make it sound like this thing was written in the nether pits of Hell at the dawn of time, and that there are secrets in here that every Hermetic ever born would give his left nut for."

"And?" Sheldon prompted.

"It's bullshit. It's all bullshit. I mean, even the Latin of the title is bad — it should be Liber Nefandorum. It's just mumbo-jumbo that impresses the easily impressed, a fraud on old paper."

"Hmm. A pity." Sheldon continued to flip through the book, then abruptly shut it. "Tell you what: if it's such a piece of crap, do you mind if I borrow it for a few days?" When Devin looked skeptical, he added hurriedly, "Just to see what all the fuss is about. I swear it won't leave this room."

Devin shrugged. "Suit yourself. Give it back when you get bored. Oh, and don't tell Magister Lewes you've got it." With that, he left the cramped office, slamming the door behind him.

Sheldon waited a moment to make sure there was no chance of Devin charging back in, then opened the book to the first page and began reading. "Don't worry, my friend," he muttered under his breath. "I won't."

Among the tools the Nephandi have created to assist in their great work is a veritable library of occult tomes, scrolls and grimoires designed to trap unwary minds and, not coincidentally, bringing in a few dollars on the collectors' market. Filthy lucre aside, these books are nothing more or less than carefully designed snares for the curious. Woven into each volume are subtle

magics and lures, designed to build a slow obsession in the reader with the subject matter. Upon finishing one, his only thought will be to further his collection and find another, and then another, and so on. Intervention is usually fruitless, and the downward spiral continues until he is helplessly ensnared by those who can get him all the dark occult information he wants: the Nephandi.

To the general public (or that small slice of it that has interest in antiquarian books), such titles are merely curiousities, no more or less interesting than The Witches' Hammer or suchlike. Indeed, many booksellers play up the "cursed" nature of titles like the Malleus Nefandorum, as a vague air of menace tends to drive the price up. To sleepers, such books are useless as anything other than showpieces. Nothing in them can cause a reader to Awaken, and there's precious little content that would be of use to even a competent hedge wizard or sorcerer. However, the rumors of a curse are not entirely fanciful. Bad luck does tend to stalk anyone who owns one of these titles, a simple device built into them in order to make sure they stay in circulation. After all, the books don't do the Nephandi any good if they're sitting in a collector's library somewhere. It is far better, from a certain perspective, that the collector meet with a horrible accident, his heirs put the collection on the block, and a world of potential victims get another chance to put their hands on it.

The Malleus Nefandorum

By far, the most famous title in the Nephandic catalog is the dreaded Malleus Nefandorum. It is the subject of hushed whispers and frenzied searching, for its pages are reputed to contain all of the dark secrets of Nephandic magic, theory and practice. It is said that the keys to unlocking, and perhaps destroying the Nephandi is hidden within its pages, and that a sufficiently learned scholar just might be able to decipher them. With that knowledge, the war against the Nephandi could be prosecuted to its fullest extent and their menace could be eliminated once and for all.

Mind you, it's generally Nephandi saying this, and snickering up their coat sleeves as they do so.

The book itself has a rather lengthy and mysterious history. It first appeared on the scene in the sixth century CE, with copies simultaneously appearing in a half-dozen cities along the Mediterranean coast. No author was ever credited, though more than a few mages (mostly Batini) were put to the question as to who was responsible. The author remained elusive, however, and while a dozen witch hunts were launched, none were successful. Meanwhile, the book's pernicious influence spread, as traders took it across the Mediterranean to Greece, Rome and Gaul.

Credit Where Credit Is Due

While the hunt for the author of the Malleus Nefandorum was fruitless, it turns out that the hunters were on the right track. The author of the book was in fact a former Batini, a Persian Iblisi named Bubaces. Bubaces was a proponent of the notion that since the Ahl-i-Batin were balanced between light and dark, they had nothing to fear from the Cauls. A group of Nephandic mages active in the area took this as a challenge, and invited the great scholar to test his theory. Foolishly, he did, with predictable results.

Bubaces was turned in 516 CE, and as an enthusiastic convert, promptly set about writing his masterwork. The process took over seven years, during which time Bubaces dwelt as a hermit in the wilds of Bactria. Among gullible Tradition mages, legend has it that the book's unnamed author wrote the entire book throughout the course of a single year, during which he neither ate nor slept, and that he scribed it in blood on flayed human flesh. The truth, sadly, is more mundane.

The book took all seven years to compose, during which numerous false starts were made (the source of some of the other occult texts in circulation). Bubaces created nine copies, each of which was hand-scribed onto paper and dispatched by demonic courier to cities along the coast. Each copy was infused with an identical set of magical workings, all of which were bent towards subtly affecting the mind of the reader. Furthermore, magical protections were laid on the book so that whenever it was copied, the magical effects would be copied as well. No matter how many copies were made or by what method, each and every one would be complete, and serve Bubaces' will as surely as if he'd hand scribed it himself.

For himself, he kept none, as he'd already chiseled the words of the text on the walls of the cave in which he dwelt. He then sealed the cave himself, and sat down to await starvation. No one has yet found the place where he dwelt, and as far as is known, no one even knows to look for it. To the Batini, Bubaces became a legend or, in a few cases, an embarrassment, but no link was ever made between him and the book, and since that fateful day when he accepted the Nephandi's invitation, no one has made any effort to look for him.

In the centuries following, the book acquired a something of a well-deserved sinister reputation. While recorded appearances are few and far between — a copy was burned in Constantinople in 843, another was reportedly destroyed by Albertus Magnus — it remained a shadowy presence on the fringes of magical society. The Nephandic connection was well-known, but the details of the book remained mysterious.

Modern Day

At this point, there is no telling how many copies of the Malleus Nefandorum are out there. Interestingly, the Nephandi have resisted the urge to produce a mass-market edition of the book, fearing perhaps that with too many copies available, the book and its snares will be too easily deciphered. Instead, it remains rare but just on the fringes of availability, should a mage work hard enough at the task. Tradition mages take great pains to warn their students to avoid the book, and to report any instances wherein they achieve access to it. Most also go into detail as to what precisely the perils of the book might be, and why it's generally a bad idea to go mucking about with it.

Meanwhile, a small but steady whispering campaign (run, of course, by Nephandi) drops hints into mages' ears that the book contains all the secrets of the sect. As humility is not necessarily a trait one often finds among the Awakened, it's deceptively simple for a Fallen to tempt the occasional magus with the notion of being the one who finally deciphers how to finish the Nephandi once and for all. Apprentices are even easier to tempt into looking, as many are looking for shortcuts to power. And Convention mages who feel that it's worthwhile to "know thy enemy" often find themselves knowing the Nephandi a little too well after picking up a copy of the book.

Currently, the number of people who know what the Malleus is really all about is astonishingly small. The Nephandic lie seems to have become generally accepted, and if asked, most mages will describe the book as more of a reference than a grimoire or a threat. Until that changes, the book will continue to be a useful tool for the Nephandi.

Between the Covers

The Malleus Nefandorum does indeed contain a great deal of information about Nephandic rites, practices, beliefs and organization, albeit with the caveat that the subject matter as written has become a bit dated. While some of Bubaces' writing was remarkably prescient, the text remains firmly grounded in the year 516, and as such is of limited utility to the modern magical sociologist. It does, however, contain a wealth of knowledge about the various entities the various Nephandic groups worship, serve and call upon, as well as a detailed procedure for inverting a mage's Avatar.

If this were all that the book contained, it would be an exceedingly useful text, and part of any well-educated mage's research library. The book, however, is thoroughly impregnated with Qlippothic Mind effects, ones so subtle as to be undetectable by all save the most powerful mages. These gently warp the reader's mind toward a Nephandic viewpoint, urging him to read deeper into the book and thus subject himself to even more inimical magic. By the time the reader reaches the last page, he's practically ready to go *barabbi*. The full effects of exposure to the book sometimes take weeks or even months to appear, but once the cover has been opened, in most cases it's just a matter of time.

Un-Awakened readers tend to catch only the fringes of the magical effect. Those predisposed to instability often go mad, and malicious luck does tend to strike them on a regular basis until they unload the book. However, the Un-Awakened mind is safe from most of the dangers the book poses. Even most linear magicians can read it, take notes and pass it on, though they generally recognize the book's Resonance and rid themselves of it as quickly as possible.

Awakened readers, however, are the ones for whom the trap has been set. As soon as the first word of text is read, the effects Bubaces left behind begin their work, and they are immensely difficult to reverse. Readers who are forcibly kept away from the book (for example, if the book is stolen from them) react in the same way as a drug addict facing going cold turkey — that is to say, not well. It wasn't until nearly a thousand years later that a Hermetic mage named Theodorus of Nice issued what formed the foundation of the later perception of the book. Theodorus had been a promising student, but was perhaps a bit too ambitious and that led to his downfall. Reading the Malleus, he was turned in secret and returned to his chantry to continue his "research." In reality, he wrote a propaganda tract that was widely disseminated. Its content was simple and familiar: The book was a guide to the Nephandi, sufficient study of it offered promising leads on how to combat them, and that it should be sought out and pored over.

Theodorus himself survived as a deep-cover mole for the Nephandi for several more years before being found in his chambers, his throat slashed and wadded-up pages of his own treatise on Qlippothic magic stuffed into his mouth. The body, wisely, was burned.

It seems almost clichéd, but the refrain "I can put the book down whenever I want" is a familiar one to those who've seen friends or colleagues dive into it.

Other Titles

The Malleus Nefandorum is not the only book on the Nephandic best-seller list. There are between 10 and 15 other titles released and set loose with similar intent, though none is quite so effective or well-known as the Malleus. These books circulate through occult bookstores, reseller conventions and private collectors' circuits, and show up every so often on tabloid television as "satanic." While they are nowhere near as potent as the original Malleus (though a few of Bubaces' failed attempts are reasonably dangerous), they do pose a danger to the insufficiently guarded mind.

Evil Online

With the growing popularity of online publishing, it seems only a matter of time before someone makes a scanned copy of the Malleus Nefandorum available for free download. While there is no telling what the combination of Bubaces' efforts and modern technology will produce, odds are that it will be very bad indeed. And since it is entirely possible to code an email virus that will force a computer's browser to open a particular URL, the potential for widespread exposure to such a site is truly alarming.

The Tainted Touch

The Nephandi have their fingers in a great many pies. Then again, they have a great many fingers — and other appendages — at their disposal. The hallmarks of a group likely to be touched by the Fallen Ones include a combination of a high public profile and murky finances; a centralized organization where the corruption of one or two key individuals taints the entire group; and some vague aroma of respectability that can mask what the group is really doing.

Tabloid television provides a perfect example of this plan of attack. While the Technocracy has invested decades and billions in convincing the public to accept the word of newscasters as gospel (or at least accurate), the Nephandi have been able to subvert that hard-won credibility to their own purposes. Creating tabloid TV shows that mix fact with rumor, innuendo and slander, the Nephandi have been able to get an entire generation of watchers to accept what comes from their shows as truth (after all, the TV wouldn't lie) — and the flood of filth, gossip and outright falsehood that flows from

Reading List

A few of the better known titles of this sort include:

• Calum Oglivie's Dubh Morh, otherwise known as The Black Book of Speyside. This is a fairly straightforward grimoire, though its emphasis on spiral imagery should give a well-educated mage some pause. Only four copies are known to exist, and all are in private or university collections.

• The Collected Prophecies of Anna Sheldrake. Sheldrake was a self-professed medium and spiritualist who would go into trances for hours on end. During these periods, she would spout off extended rants that her mother would write down as prophecy. After Anna's death in 1899, Sheldrake's mother sold the prophecies to a publisher and, after suitable "editing," they were put in print in 1903. They caused a minor sensation at the time, but have since faded into obscurity.

• The Thirteen Hours, by Victorian-era *barabbus* and former Cultist of Ecstasy Genevieve Le Blanc. Theoretically a work of somewhat shocking (for the period) erotica, the book has achieved a reputation as an extremely minor classic of the genre, and on rare occasions it is the subject of academic inquiry.

• The Ebon Broomstick, a recent release by well-known occult author Dana Flaherty. Flaherty's books have achieved some small mass-market success, and while The Ebon Broomstick is his first distinctly Nephandic work, his relatively large following bodes ill. It should also be noted that Flaherty's publisher, Hooded Lantern Books, has shifted the emphasis of its product line to increasingly darker material in the past year.

the tabloid shows does little for the world's spiritual development. Even better, at least as far as the Nephandi are concerned, is the fact that they only created two or three of these shows. The rest have been generated by copycat mortals, who see a formula for success and imitate it. Little do these would-be Cronkite Lites know that by churning out another Inside Copy or Hard Hours, they do the will of the Labyrinths.

So the Nephandi have fingers in a lot of pies, but only fingers. It's not worth their while to have total, micromanagerial control of things — they leave that sort of obsession to the Syndicate. Rather, Nephandi merely introduce the desired corruption to the target system, and then let it spread naturally. One or two efficient, successful operatives — ones whom the masses struggle to emulate — do far more good than a horde of inefficient drones, requiring constant supervision.

Other known or suspected realms of Nephandus influence include:

• The roleplaying game industry: In possibly their most daring double-bluff, the Nephandi have infiltrated the roleplaying game industry even while fostering ludicrous attacks against it. Backing those who make ridiculous, easily countered rants about the "evil" of games, the Nephandi subtly encourage people to discount those warnings. Convinced that the anti-gaming howls were just propaganda, gamers then themselves open to the real corrupting influence of such games. Products from Black Dog Games in particular have the stench of the Labyrinths on them, but the rush by other companies to emulate Black Dog's vaguely hip stylings has opened new doors for the subtle corruption of the pseudo-intelligentsia.

• The New Age guru of the week: While Awakened Avatars are few and far between, over the past decade more and more paths to enlightenment have come to Sleepers' attention. To countermand this flood of knowledge of the rudiments of true magic, the Nephandi have jumped onto the New Age bandwagon, perverting and subverting teachings that might otherwise have made a difference. With the help of allies in the publishing industry (having Pentex as a minority shareholder is not the best way to ensure creative freedom), these Nephandi-derived tomes crowd more accurate volumes off the shelves. At the same time, the mass-produced volumes are full of misinformation, dead-ending many spiritual quests before they begin. The end result: Those who might have been true seekers get discouraged and abandon studies that might have helped them Awaken. The Traditions are thus deprived of needed reinforcements, even as power-hungry would-be mages turn to ever-more esoteric sources of lore. Such seekers after esoterica often fall into the clutches of the K'llashaa, which the Nephandi regard as an unexpected bonus.

• Pentex: Having bought into Pentex through a variety of proxies and other stratagems, the Nephandi are currently looking to lever as many of their "partners" out as quickly as possible. The assets of having a share are obvious: easy cooperation with other servants of Malfeas, a world-wide distribution network for just about any product, economic and personnel bases all over the world, and enough free cash to do just about anything without resorting to magic.

Needless to say, the Nephandi (adsinistrati in particular) have no compunctions about using this resource to best advantage. Need to buy up the land that's got a

Node sputtering in a middle of it? Pentex can pick it up for a "research station." Pesky native activists fighting to keep their land? Pentex lawyers and money can bleed them white in court. While the average Nephandus doesn't have much to do with Pentex's day-to-day operations, those who can make use of the corporation's resources do so without compunction.

• Televangelists: Contrary to popular belief among the Celestial Chorus, the Nephandi don't own any Southern televangelists — at least not directly. Rather, their tack with TV preachers is to help them succeed — certain ones, at least. The Nephandi don't own the televangelists; they own the men behind them, and that's infinitely more dangerous.

By carefully aiding and abetting the rise of certain televangelists and stunting the careers of others, the Nephandi ensure that the vast majority of those preachers who reach a national (or worldwide) stage have deeply flawed characters. Would-be prosletyzers with tendencies toward drinking problems, financial abuses, or sexual escapades that would shock the home parishioners — these are the sorts of men whom the Nephandi help to ascend into the limelight. The idea, of course, is to attach the hopes, dreams and faith of millions to these ultimately flawed figures, and then to let them fail on their own, betraying those who believed in their messages. Every time this sordid story plays itself out, more believers abandon their faith.

The Nephandi prefer to own handlers, financial advisors and corporate officers instead of preachers. After all, in many cases it's the opulent organization behind the televangelist that truly disgusts observers, not the predictable on-air begging and rants about salvation. Amusement parks, Learjets and mansions paid for by tax-exempt charitable donations are far more offensive to many than dull fundamentalist programming could ever be. The servants of the Nephandi take great care to make sure that this level of conspicuous consumption is maintained — and talked about in the media.

It is important to note that the Nephandi stay away from their creations once they've gotten things rolling. There's no competition for the Syndicate when it comes calling to rake in its share of the millions a televangelist makes; by that time the Nephandi have already done all they need to do. At this point, it's just a matter of waiting until the inevitable fall.

Note: Nephandi also take a special interest in evangelists whose faith is genuine, especially those who exhibit either Numina or real magical potential. Such preachers are liable to find any and all attempts they make to move to a larger stage countered by the Fallen Ones.

Action Units

The Nephandi send a wide variety of unit types into the field. The composition of any given strike team depends, obviously, on the nature of the team's mission; sending a gang of pawns to assassinate a Chantry head is a waste of good cannon fodder, while putting a full strike team on the case of a pesky mortal is overkill. Evil does not mean tactically inept.

The basic self-sufficient field unit consists of a handful of pawns (un-Awakened, of course) who may or may not know what they're actually doing, herded along by a pair of shaytans and a single adsinistratus. The pawns hound the team's target into the open, whereupon the shaytans pick up the chase and, hopefully, finish it. The commanding adsinistratus rarely, if ever, gets involved in the dirty work, but may take an active hand in matters if it looks like the shaytans are in trouble.

The size of strike teams varies, of course. The largest on record (under cover as a street gang in West Philadelphia) consisted of over 40 un-Awakened pawns, nine shaytans, no fewer than three adsinistrati with overlapping responsibilities and a single prelati. Why such an intense concentration of force was necessary remains unclear, but the series of bizarre incidents (the exposure of a thriving mail-order business in human remains, a fire that devastated over 130 houses, the discovery of a pair of "house-of-horrors" style murder sites, and so on) in the Philadelphia area following the creation of this strike team indicates that they were hard at work on something.

While pawns are expendable, shaytans and adsinistrati are not. Every strike team also has a backdoor — connections to local pawns who can serve to cover an escape. These safety valves may not know that a strike force may come looking for shelter with them, and more than one newly turned mage has been surprised to find the smoldering remains of a strike team on his doorstep, demanding help now.

Basic strike teams go armed to the teeth with both eldritch and conventional weaponry; a bullet to the brain kills as surely as an Entropy-induced embolism and without risking a Paradox backlash. In special cases, strike teams are granted special allies by their Masters, allies which can best be described as things. Often literally indescribable (or at least foul), these things are deadly in combat, garnering as much advantage from their hideous appearance as from their claws, tentacles and other weaponry. On the down side, these "living" weap-

ons tend to call down heavy Paradox backlash, but in situations that demand heavy artillery, most strike teams will take that risk.

There are never more than two strike teams working in a given city at a given time; by unspoken agreement strike teams steer clear of one another's operations.

Bigger Problems

Hard as it may be to believe, the Nephandi have other pressing concerns besides the relentless pressure of the Ascension War. Malfean Nephandi time and again find themselves charging into conflicts originated by their allies, often fighting to hold off angered spirits and shapeshifters while the tainted werewolves who started the conflict are long gone. Tensions between the two groups have been steadily rising for some time, exacerbated, some Malfeans claim, by the actions of other factions of Nephandi.

However, there are other Malfeans to worry about, namely, the greatest and most powerful Spectres. Dwelling in a Labyrinth of their own gnawing, these servants of Oblivion (not the Wyrm) devote themselves to the corruption of the living and the dead, at least when they can rouse themselves from fitful slumber.

Dead Things

Far worse, however, are the true Malfeans — the ageless Never-born Spectres who sleep uneasily at the heart of the Underworld's Labyrinth. Created when Entropy was born, these creatures gnawed the endlessly shifting corridors of the First Labyrinth from the raw stuff of Creation. Now, they slumber restlessly in the chambers and halls they've carved out for themselves, dreaming dreams of power and destruction.

Such dreams concern the Nephandi, and with good reason. The uncanny number of coincidences between the geography of the Underworld and the Nephandi's own paradigm has raised many questions. Recently, much to their regret, a team of Infernalist researchers set out to discover the truth behind this uncanny resonance.

The conclusions that this research team reached both frightened and angered the reigning gilledeans — and their Masters. Not one of the researchers outlived his initial presentation of the team's findings by more than five minutes, and every report, note or voice recording made during the course of the study found itself consigned to the fire. At least, that was the fate of all of the research materials that could be found. Certain materials, smuggled out by Void Engineer *barabbi* to Convention acquaintances, revealed the chilling truth.

In essence, the report claimed that the entities the Nephandi serve are nothing more than the dreams of the sleeping Malfeans in the primal Labyrinth. The Labyrinths, titles and natures of all that dwell Beyond are reflections and sleep-distorted versions of the thoughts flickering through the sleeping minds of the Never-born. And, when one of the sleeping Malfeans awakens, much that he dreams vanishes.

Both fear and excitement have sprung from this last point, particularly among Technocratic mages and the restless dead who spy on them. Researches into the Shadowlands indicate that the oldest and most powerful Malfean, Gorool, awakened just as the Technocracy and Traditions commenced their final assault on the Nephandi in 1945. Observers from both groups remarked at the time that the defending Nephandi seemed confused and weakened, and many called on powers or allies that never materialized. The implication of all this is that Gorool's awakening destroyed his dreaming creations, depriving those who served those dreams of power in their hour of need.

Even now, a report from a gang of ghostly spies sits on the desk of the Skeletal Lord of the dead. Inside are the details of a proposed invasion of the Labyrinth by a multi-Convention strike force. The assault's stated purpose is simple: To awaken the slumbering Malfeans, thus perilously weakening the resurgent Nephandi. As for the effect that this tactic would have on the Shadowlands, the Technocratic assessment is chillingly simple: unimportant.

Worse still, though, are those Nephandi who have heard snippets of this research, and come to the conclusion that if they are only worshippers of *dreams* of true outer darkness, then how much more powerful could they be if they worshipped the things that dreamed such horrors into existence?

Rumored Tactics

Dragging the whole of creation down to rotted corruption isn't something that you accomplish overnight. The ultimate victory of the Nephandi's masters must come instead as a result of millions of tiny operations, each of which brings eternity one step closer to crashing down. These tactics are some of the more commonly used, giving you a game plan for the use of Nephandi in your chronicle.

• Stalking Horse — The Nephandi don't care about being subtle with other humans; it's just reality

that they have to worry about offending (for the moment). As a result, a favorite tactic involves terrifying or bribing prominent Sleepers (politicians and entrepreneurs, especially) into working for the Dark Lords. These high-ranking pawns then follow orders from below, taking actions so inflammatory as to flush the local Tradition mages out. Major land purchases are always good for getting Dreamspeakers in a huff, while obscenity, lifestyle and drug statutes usually flush the Choristers, Cultists and Verbena into the public arena. While the Tradition mages attempt to deal with things subtly, they're easy prey for shaytan hit teams. The more the Tradition mages try to keep things under wraps, the wilder the shaytans get, forcing the defenders to spend more and more of their energies bottling things up (and less and less counterattacking).

Conversely, this sort of approach can also reveal the presence of Technocrats, who may well come out into the field to find out why their bought politician or businessman isn't staying bought any more.

• Keeping the Pot Boiling — An alliance of Technocracy and Tradition mages banished the majority of Nephandi a half century ago, and the Fallen Ones haven't forgotten. They now take special delight in stirring up trouble between the two factions, then sitting back and watching the fun. Usually a *barabbus* or two will infiltrate each side in a given city, handing over information on the "enemy's" weakness that's too good to resist. Mutually destructive battles result, leaving both sides desperate for immediate help. This, of course, the *barabbi* are only too happy to supply, with the chain of events leading to immediate escalation, more fighting, and so on. If a temporary truce ever threatens, a time-honored technique involves each mole "outing" the Nephandus on the other side, giving her putative allies all the more incentive to renew the fighting.

• Turf Wars — There's always good fun to be had in inciting the local supernatural population. Vampires and werewolves never need an excuse to be paranoid, so providing them with one simply increases the fun. In cases like this, a Nephandus kills a few innocent bystanders (if he's really feeling vicious, he establishes a "pattern" to his victims) and alters the corpses somehow using magic. A favorite involves cracking the corpses' bones and draining the marrow from inside; other approaches involve mutilations or the growth of hideous cancers. Once the Nephandus has his pawns scatter the bodies throughout his city (using Time magics to diffuse any reading one might get on time of death), it's only a matter of time before the local supernaturals get wind of this new, unknown threat that's doing horrible things they've never seen before. The vampires get jumpy, start blaming each other, and go for each others' throats. As any vampire worth his salt has his fingers on a dozen or so mortals, these humans also get caught up in the conflict, leading to riots, murders and other civic disturbances. While all of this shakes down, the local Garou go on the warpath, decimating anything in their way as they go looking for whatever Wyrm-creature committed the foul deeds. Chaos, terror and blood inevitably ensue, all to the benefit of the Nephandis' masters.

• Dream a Little Dream — Open confrontation is not, and never has been, the Nephandi's style. They prefer to attack only when the overwhelming advantage of numbers is on their side. When not in possession of an overwhelming advantage, Nephandi prefer to harry their targets, slowly weakening them until they fall from attrition.

One of the best ways to do this is by invading a target's dreams. A steady flow of nightmares piped into the victim's subconscious disrupts her sleep patterns, makes her nervous and irritable, and often leads to mistakes in combat. Furthermore, dream reactions foreshadow ones that the dreamer will make in real life. Particularly subtle Nephandi try out their battle plans in broadcast nightmares, checking the targets' dreaming responses and planning real-life countermeasures.

Faces in the Shadows

There are many ways to serve the Lords of the Outer Darkness. While most Nephandi could quaintly be labeled "self-starters," at least when it comes to the business of corruption, some band together into groups so as to pool their resources. Others prefer being in a position to receive orders, and as such gravitate to the more hierarchical sects of Nephandi.

The K'llashaa

Perhaps the closest among the Nephandi to the overworked Lovecraftian stereotype, the K'llashaa have formalized their service to the Outer Things into a quasi-religious format. This pseudo-religion comes down from the sub-sect's leaders (who more or less know the truth of what they serve) to the rank and file. These souls, many of whom are un-Awakened, honestly believe that human and animal sacrifices, spitting on crucifixes, and mumbling long prayers to deities with unpronounceable names will bring about a golden age

of terror on earth. The proof for this theory is lacking at the moment, but at the very least, the masterminds of the K'llashaa are well supplied with henchmen, supporters and resources.

In the unspeakable names of their unspeakable deities, K'llashaa commit the foulest acts of depravity with the greatest reverence. Serial killings, messages in blood, severed body parts sent through the mail, church and synagogue vandalisms, particularly gory rapes and murders — all are acts of worship to members of the K'llashaa.

A new inductee into the K'llashaa must make his conversion as spectacular and public as possible. The act of initiation must also serve as a renunciation of all the mage stood for in his previous existence, leaving no doubt as to where the magus stands now. Betrayals of friends and loved ones, desecration of Nodes and holy sites, harm wreaked on the innocent and ignorant — all of these put the stamp of legitimacy on a mage's conversion to the K'llashaa.

Malfeans

Regarded with some suspicion by the rest of the Nephandi, the Malfeans (not to be confused with the Spectres of the same name) are Fallen Ones who pledge their devotion and service to the Wyrm. These mages work toward the end of everything, seeing in the Wyrm license to rend, destroy and annihilate. While many Malfeans tend to overintellectualize this alliance with the Wyrm ("We don't actually believe in the existence of a giant annelid nibbling on all of creation, Desmond — the notion Wyrm is just a linguistic construct created by the oral tradition of those quaint Garou masking the active entropic principle which will lead, sooner rather than later, to the heat-death of the universe,"), they do pledge their souls to something on Malfeas, often walking the Black Spiral itself to reaffirm the depth of their commitment.

Unbelievably, even other Nephandi regard Malfeans as somewhat off. For one thing, until recently these Wyrm-tainted mages showed a suspicious preference for working with Black Spiral Dancers instead of other Nephandi, claiming that the tainted Garou are more trustworthy. Furthermore, there's a vague hint of assimilationism to Malfeans *that the other Nephandi* just can't quite get over. While the Outsiders and Infernalists worship assorted, often mutually contradictory entities, demons and Elder Beasts, at least those entities are theirs. Malfeans, by contrast, are viewed as "converts" in a sense to the religion of the Black Spiral Dancers, and as ridiculous as it seems, other Nephandi just don't trust them.

The Benevolent Society of Lost Souls

Less an organization and more a social club, the members of the Benevolent Society are *the elite of* the Nephandi's snatch-and-grab units. This isn't because they have any special training, or have any particular orders from Beyond the Nighted Gulfs. Rather, it's because they enjoy torture and kidnapping, and therefore practice both arts until they get very, very good at each.

The Benevolent Society is bound only by its members' enjoyment of their shared activities; it's not uncommon to find Malfeans, K'llasshaa, Infernalists and even the odd Sabbat vampire all out for a "social" together. Members of the B.S. often affect Victorian or Edwardian fashion styles, use mock-formal language, and generally come across as swishy versions of the droogs from A Clockwork Orange — at least until they spot their target. Then the group springs into highly efficient action, all the more stunning in contrast to their earlier behavior.

Chapters of the B.S. can be found in any major city, as the membership roster is unstable, to say the least. While the Society does not recruit for itself — its prizes are inevitably turned over to others — there are a high percentage of *barabbi* taken by the Society who later *join its ranks.*

Stereotypes

Traditions: The most magical thing about this batch of back-biting egocentric morons is the fact that they've lasted this long. What we really ought to do is drop out of sight for a decade, during which time they're sure to chew themselves to ribbons.

Technocracy: They want to remake the universe in the image of their master. We want to remake the universe in the image of our masters. *Whose do you think are stronger?*

Marauders: Pointless insanity is just that — pointless. We just try not to be around when one of these mental time bombs goes off, though if we can point a Marauder at a bunch of Techies or Trads, so much the better.

Independents: Useful tools for the simple reason that we don't care about them. If they're for us, great, if they're against us, they don't have enough even to slow us down. In the meantime, though, everyone else is wasting their resources worrying about these bit players.

Nephandi and You (and Your Players and the Screams of Anguish...)

Louis di Alessandro surveyed the coffeehouse with a slight frown. It was well lit, and he knew that the brightness of a café was proportionally opposite to the quality of the coffee it served. He took a cautious sip from the steaming cup of espresso before him and grimaced. It was just as bad as he'd anticipated.

He was saved from taking a second sip by the arrival of his 11:30 appointment (automatically, di Alessandro's eyes slid to his watch: 11:42. This one was both late and sloppy), who slid into the booth mumbling apologies and excuses. Di Alessandro waved him to silence, and looked him up and down. The mage didn't look like much; he was in his mid-twenties, and dressed in the de rigeur black of the Hollow Ones. A silver ankh swung from a leather cord at his neck, and his nose ring was tastefully thin.

Di Alessandro took another sip of coffee to hide his disgust.

"I really shouldn't be here," the Hollow One began.

"Shush." di Alessandro put the coffee cup down with a clank. "You are here, Alaric. Can I get you something to drink? No? Well then, perhaps I can get you something else."

"Really, I just came to tell you that I've thought it over and I'm not interested." Alaric looked defiant, but with his kind, di Alessandro knew, that was just another way of saying "frightened."

"Now Alaric, you're just being contrary. I can do quite a bit to help you, and the price is right, is it not?" Mentally sighing, di Alessandro tried his best to project calm. "Look, I've known you for how long?"

"Two weeks."

"Okay, two weeks. But that doesn't matter. What does matter is that I've seen the way the others treat you. I've seen how they look at you as being second class. You shouldn't have to put up with that sort of crap."

"Those are my friends you're talking about!"

"Sure, sure," di Alessandro's voice was soothing. "But you still feel like you don't quite belong, do you? You want to show them that you're worthy." Almost unwillingly, the boy nodded. Inwardly, di Alessandro smiled. This was going to be easier than he'd thought. "Well, I've got just the thing." His face still a mask of concern, he reached into his pocket and pulled out what looked to be the mother of all marbles, a smoky glass sphere three inches in diameter. Dimly glimpsed, shapes moved in the depths of the glass.

"What is it?" Alaric leaned forward for a closer look.

"It's a Paradox eater. With this on you, you'll be able to kick out the jams and impress your friends. You'll probably even be able to rescue them once or twice, and the best thing is, with this thing's help you can get as vulgar as you want, and absolutely nothing will happen to you."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing."

"But," Alaric stammered, even as he reached for the globe, "why are you doing this for me?"

Di Alessandro appeared to muse the question over, then he leaned forward with a smile. "Because, Alaric, I like you. Because you remind me of me, a long time ago, and I want to give you the help that I never got. And, because I've already got one myself."

"Oh." A pause. "Thank you." Alaric hastily stuffed the sphere in his pocket, then scuttled out into the night. Di Alessandro shook his head. It had been too easy. The thing he'd given the boy, well, while it did devour something, it certainly didn't feed on Paradox. When the things the sphere contained broke free, they'd forever taint Alaric's reputation with his "friends," and the boy would have only one place to run: back to di Alessandro, and the things in his sphere. Despite the lousy espresso, the barabbus found himself grinning, and he settled back to wait for his next "customer." "Nothing like loving your work," he said to no one in particular, and drank deeply.

Consider the lowly virus. Barely even considered to be alive, it somehow manages to worm its way past the defenses of a given cell (and even that cell dwarfs our little virus, let alone the organism of which that cell is an infinitesmal part) and inserts itself in the genetic machinery of the cell's nucleus. Then, interesting things start to happen. The cell, infected by the tiny virus, starts churning out other copies of the virus. It has become corrupted, and in its corruption, it serves the will of its corrupter. Then, when it has given its all, the cell dies and its bastard children, the other viruses, are loosed upon all of the other cells in the body. Eventually, the body itself becomes corrupted, and dies. Every cell dies, even as the greater whole does. And our plucky little viruses? Well, they die too, but with a job well done and no sentience to speak of, they don't much care.

Now, consider the Nephandi. They're the viruses in the body of Creation, and the rest of the Awakened community are the cells they prey on.

Thinking of the Nephandi as evil "just because" is to shortchange them immensely. While the goals of the Fallen might seem less admirable to us than, say, the eco-friendly agenda espoused by the Dreamspeakers, that doesn't mean that the Nephandi's goals can be dismissed out of hand as unimportant or peripheral. After all, the end of the Universe is something that will *probably involve us all.*

In the short term, most Nephandi view themselves as serving a greater, primal power — perhaps one that predates the so-called "Pure Ones" or "Prime." It makes eminent sense to them to worship these first powers, to do their bidding and serve their whims. After all, in some sense one can see them as the original owners of the universe. On a more profound level, however, the Nephandi seek to aid and abet the end of everything. Creation has had its run, and now, by the will of those Things that preceeded it, it must die. Some Nephandi view this goal as the mercy *killing of a suffering reality;* others see their actions as more of a litmus test ("If the Universe can survive what we're going to do to it, then it deserves to. If it can't, then it deserves to die."). Regardless, all Nephandi have the same ultimate goal: to serve the will of the Others and, by doing so, bring about the end of all.

This is not to say that Nephandi are right, or nice, even though they can be pleasant, apologetic or even persuasively charming. (If you find yourself agreeing with the Nephandi viewpoint as this chapter goes along, the author takes it as high praise of his skills and recommends that you seek professional psychiatric help immediately.) In the end, Nephandi are those souls who believe in, abet and actively seek to spread corruption — and they enjoy their work. They don't want to rule the world, they want to end it, and all of reality with it. The Technocracy may wish to recreate the world in its sterile image, but at least at the end of the process there'd be a world left. The Traditions may squabble among themselves, but *they squabble about what to do* with the world — not how best to destroy it. The Marauders may be mad, but destruction is incidental to their attempts to create a more comfortable reality for themselves. The Nephandi, by doing the will of their Dark Masters, would destroy all — and they're cheerfully unapologetic about it.

Recommended Reading

Storytelling Nephandi well is not an easy task. Thankfully, ultimate corruption and suicidal megalomania don't come easily to most people. However, for some good examples of literary Nephandus-types, you might want to try:

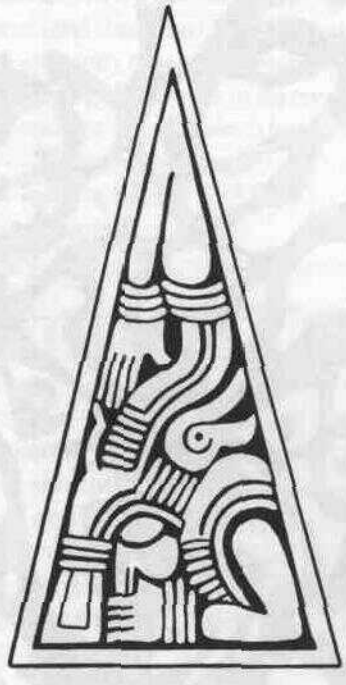
"The Sect of the Idiot" and "Frolic" by Thomas Ligotti (in Songs of a Dead Dreamer)

"Dreams in the Witch-House," "The Hound," and "The Dunwich Horror" by H.P. Lovecraft

"The Events at Poroth Farm" by T.E.D. Klein

Bad Dreams by Kim Newman

Much of the work of Clive Barker



Chapter Two: Marauders

"Mad, adj. Affected with a high degree of intellectual independence; not conforming to standards of thought, speech and action derived by the conformants from study of themselves; at odds with the majority; in short, unusual. It is noteworthy that persons are pronounced mad by officials destitute of evidence that they themselves are sane. For illustration, this present (and illustrious) lexicographer is no firmer in the faith of his own sanity than is any inmate of any madhouse in the land; yet for aught he knows to the contrary, instead of the lofty occupation that seems to him to be engaging his powers he may really be beating his hands against the window bars of an asylum and declaring himself Noah Webster, to the innocent delight of many thoughtless spectators."

—Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil's Dictionary*

Nothing is True

The Awakened will is a mighty thing, capable of fantastic and dangerous feats. The enlightened may divine the future, heal the sick with miracles or create machines far beyond the level of advancement of mundane technology. Always lurking is the danger of Paradox, though, to keep the stresses of being pushed and twisted by the Awakened from tearing apart the very fabric of reality.

Mages must be careful then, always striving to make their changes subtle and safe, both for their own good and the good of others around them. Now imagine this enlightened will, capable of amazing acts, with absolutely no regard for safety or restraint. Imagine it with no

regard for the forces of Paradox that might come to keep reality stable, or in fact with no regard for reality at all. Imagine, for a moment, an enlightened mind so divorced from the conception of the world as held by the common man that it can't even tell when it's changing reality or simply existing. This is what a Marauder is: a living embodiment of Dynamism. The world warps and tears from the force of their constantly broadcast wills, going fluid and reforming to match their skewed inner realities.

As the ultimate expressions of chaos, nothing about Marauders is consistent. They are as different from each other as they are from the norm. They may be apocalyptic mayflies, screaming across creation like a napalm strike seconds before destroying themselves and everything around them. Others could be the gibbering freaks of stereotype, speaking in tongues to inanimate objects and leaving a trail of molten clocks in their wake. Perhaps most frightening are the Marauders who seem perfectly lucid, the world around them fluxing in subtle ways not easy to notice. This thinking applies to individuals as well as to the whole. A marauder may cycle through these states and infinite others in the course of an hour, flashing from serene to genocidal and back. Nothing this wild is stagnant, and nothing you can say about them remains true for long.

True in Some Sense

Marauders exist in a permanent state similar to what mages call Quiet, a kind of magical madness where they are lost in their own inner version of reality. Mages suffering from Quiet will react to things that are not really there, form ideas based on input only they are aware of, and ignore things that the Quiet edits from their perceptions.

The delusional state of Marauders, though, is more dangerous than mundane insanity or even "common" Quiet. Marauders' consistent use of powerful and vulgar magics makes exceptionally high Resonances the norm among them. In normal mages, Resonance colors their efforts at magic and serves to constantly broadcast the powerful aspects of their will on the world. It is usually quite subtle, though it is known to make the mage seem obviously something more than human to people she deals with. This subtlety is not present in the magically mad. Marauders' extreme Resonances are a shout compared to the whispers generated by normal mages, altering reality even without their conscious attention.

In the zones of warped reality around Marauders, their will is law. Physical objects appear and behave to everyone as they do to the wild mage. People think,

behave and dress according to the custom of his perceived society, and humans appear never to notice the change. For them, the twisted world is reality. A man might leave his suburban home for a jog, become a Spartan warrior when passing a Marauder in the park, his jog becoming the running of a message to the other side of the camp. If he is lucky enough to not be caught up in the events of the psychotic warp, he will pass out the other side and return to his original state, and be home in time for a shower and newspaper. A mage, however, is by her very nature used to living with the idea that reality is flexible. She can attempt to resist the effects of the reality warp. Mages who are less experienced, enlightened or prepared may not find it easy to keep a hold on themselves, and fall into the Quiets of the mad ones more easily.

Warps in reality are not always present with such force in Marauders. Some are totally alone in their delusions, and onlookers will see only a madman. Fluctuation is possible as well. A city block may be swallowed by a Marauder's presence one day, while previously that same wild mage was simply an erratic loose cannon with no emanations. This holds true for the content as well as the size and power of the warp. As befits such chaotic beings, the nature of their worlds sometimes changes.

In many cases the Awakened retain a great deal of free will when overcome, however, becoming more like analogues of themselves than unwilling actors in a Marauder's fantasy world. Those in this position may continue to work towards whatever goals they already had in mind with personality and methods better suited for the Quiet they find themselves in, including magical methods. What is commonly a vulgar act is not always so when caught up in the world of a wild mage.

This loosening of the rules of coincidence no doubt plays a part in the infamous resistance to Paradox of the Marauders. It's possible that the reality they create is so complete that magical acts in keeping with the rules of their personal world are not vulgar — a troubling idea indeed for those who study and combat them, though perhaps not always an unattractive one. More than one mage has gotten away unscathed by Paradox after using an effect on a Marauder that would have been vulgar to the extreme, but was commonplace for the local reality. The price of Paradox must be paid, however, if not by the Marauder. The mage who is physically closest to the Marauder usually ends up as his mystic scapegoat, suffering the ill effects of Paradox in the madman's place.

This isn't to say that every Marauder is an unending, fluctuating beacon of wildness. Some Marauders seem to exhibit only a small amount of "bent," as it were. While the externalization of this alteration may vary from day to day, an individual Marauder may simply lack the magnitude of strangeness that characterizes other, more dynamic Marauders. A few Marauders have even managed to insinuate themselves into groups of other mages. Some even exist without realizing their own condition. Marauders come in all sizes — from wildly crazed embodiments of the Dynamic principle on down to slightly twisted mages living saddened existences outside their own control.

False in Some Sense

Theories about what exactly causes someone to go spectacularly, magically insane are as numerous, and often as odd, as the Marauders themselves. The ideas about what makes them tick after they have crossed that line are even stranger, on the whole. It is a popular topic for armchair debate, that format winning out over real investigation in many cases because — well, how in the hell can a mage really study a Marauder? It's dangerous, and one cannot trust any information gathered. Still, it's an important enough subject that serious research has to be done, and there are some places where patterns can be seen, if one is willing to stare into that particular abyss long enough.

One common belief is that obsession can lead down the path of madness, and this certainly seems to fit with the habits of some Marauders. The theory is that the afflicted has invested overmuch of himself into a goal or theory and it has taken a life of its own, swallowing the mage whole. Some liken it to burning out from working too much. Advocates of this theory, especially in the Technocracy, push for steps to be taken to prevent this, stressing the dangers of overspecialization and obsession to the mind. This theory is popular among Hermetics and other followers of Western esoteric traditions, and warnings of the dangers of madness and obsession are present in even the most common of their texts.

A similar theory is that severe trauma can cause a mage to go mad, as it can in the unAwakened — the difference being, of course, magic. The theory is that a mage may try to lash out with his will in an attempt to undo the horror or shock of the situation. Presumably he fails. This failure, coupled with the stresses of the trauma, somehow bend the mind of the unfortunate. This theory seems logical enough, but does not account for Marauders who were known to be stable one day and delusional powderkegs the next. Many see both of these theories as one and the same, saying that trauma merely condenses years of obsession into one horrible moment.

Supernatural madness is not easily explained without supernatural means, according to some who feel these theories are inadequate to explain the state of Marauders. They feel that traumatic events may explain

mundane madness, but that something beyond the norm is to blame for magical insanity. A recent theory, for example, put forth by a group of Tradition mystics postulates the idea that Marauders are a dualistic counterpart to Paradox spirits. Where Paradox spirits serve to enforce laws and keep reality stable, Marauders exist to keep things from crystallizing and growing stagnant. In effect, the Marauders' constant warping of reality functions much as a current in a body of water does, keeping things from growing too concrete or stagnant.

These mystics have also hypothesized that Marauders have somehow assimilated or stolen the power of Paradox spirits and now use it to enforce their own reality. More sinister is the idea that they have been possessed somehow by rogue Paradox spirits, working against whatever force compels their fellows to enforce stability. This theme pops up again in other theories, as well. There has been speculation that the transformation to Marauder is not in the hands of the mage at all, but instead is forced on him by a mad past life. Some have even said that perhaps the Avatar, the higher self of the Awakened, is somehow bent in Marauders.

Variations of this theory, though, are plentiful. Some say that madness is karmic punishment for those who brought stasis on reality in past incarnations. Extremists have even tried to attribute the phenomenon to some sort of cosmic conspiracy, a wild god twisting the wills of mages to its own ends. This theory, while palatable to a certain breed of mage who is eager to place blame for any ill on a faraway force and thus ignore the human nature of all Awakened, receives little serious consideration.

All Things Are True, Even False Things

Marauders are possibly the single best place in **Mage** for the Storyteller to ignore the rules. How can you have rules for living forces of Dynamism that always apply? You don't; you just have a solid framework for Marauders' role within the cosmology and color as you see fit within the lines. Storytellers *should* make up their own reasons and methods for mad mages in their worlds. That's what Marauders are all about: infinite possibility. Marauders are supposed to change everything they come in touch with, including themselves. Having them all roll off the lunatic assembly line is no way to achieve that — rather, give each one that personal touch and that unique rule-bending streak.

Mages have gone insane for as long as people can remember. The expansion of the consciousness is dangerous work, and some people don't deal well with the side effects. This state of magical madness, however, is different. The first appearance of Marauders (and the term itself) that is remembered by moderm mages was in the 12th century, when they attacked and destroyed a Hermetic Chantry in Ireland. Previous to this, the hallmark abilities of the mad mages had not been seen, or at least not documented. Sightings and encounters with Marauders became more frequent over the centuries, dropping off only recently with the disappearance of the maddest of their number from Earth.

Meaningless in Some Sense

Marauders as a whole certainly don't seem to have an agenda, as such (though individuals and groups certainly seem to). It is possible, however, to discern some very general patterns to their behavior if you pull back and look at the big picture. The vast majority of Marauder activity disrupts the activities of established or entrenched power structures. The Technocracy seems the obvious target for much of this, though the most colorful tales of Marauder action feature Nephandi as the victims. Keep in mind that Marauders are just as likely to attack a theme park as they are a federal government building. The targets are not always ones that make sense in a direct way, but the disruption is almost guaranteed to shake things up in a major way. It is worth noting that many Marauders go out of their way to harm the Nephandi and their plans, perhaps seeing their brand of chaos as competition.

Tradition mages who espouse the theory of Marauders as anti-Paradox spirits feel that the mad are a natural occurrence. They believe that Marauders are somehow created as a reaction to the increasing crystallization of reality, discordian guerrillas here to keep the world from stagnation. This theory fails to explain why a Marauder might cause a school bus to be devoured by a swarm of roaches, but its proponents claim that naysayers merely cannot see the big picture. As evidence, they point to the increase in the number of known Marauders since the rise of the Technocrats.

Discussing the methods of Marauders would be like counting grains of sand on a beach. The way they go about their business makes sense only to them, or those who have deciphered their current paradigm. The only tactic all Marauders have in common is the infliction of their Paradox on other mages, though it seems more a by-product of their state than a conscious effort. On rare occasions, some very cunning and seemingly self-aware Marauders have been witnessed to do just this to their advantage, but it's uncommon and often suicidal.

Okay, words of advice. People seem to think Marauders are all unicorn-riding knights and pointy hat wizards or something. Trying to turn the world into one of those jousting restaurants. Like anything as widespread as Marauders would be so geeky. They're not gamers, kids. I know why people think this, though. There really is a reason, and yes I'm going to explain it. Stay with me.

All right, most of you have probably been to one of those Renaissance Festivals. Some of you may even know about some of the reenactment clubs that do the fake medieval wars and all that. You ever notice how people that are into that stuff are *really* into it? They start going by Corwin Ravenmoon instead of Dale Brown, talking with some goofy accent. You know who I'm talking about. If you don't, trust me. This stuff eats these people's lives. You ever wonder why these people seem like they're losing touch? I'll tell you, they are.

Think a second, how many of your peers can you think of that are into fantasy and history? Lots, right? Sure, it's common. We're a fringe subculture, kids, and we're *wizards*. Even the grease-monkeyest among us, chances are, has a soft spot for Tolkien. It's just natural, we didn't wake up one day as enlightened adults. We pursued this stuff, even as kids. And how did we do that? We read books, saw movies. We wanted to be like that: heroic and different and right. This stuff is hardwired into an awful lot of people. I'm right, right?

Okay, to the point: where do you think Marauders' get their demented fantasy lives from? Sure, lots of them seem to come up with shit I've just never heard of. I bet most of them retreat into something warm and fuzzy and safe, though. Something like the millions of fantasy novels they ate up as kids.

Now, it's a fact that Marauders with the same kind of headspace can work together. I've seen it. Well, not firsthand, but I know it goes on. I'd even feel comfortable saying they might be attracted to each other, like the last few bits of cereal in the bowl. On some level, these things have to be able to detect a kindred spirit. So what happens? One or a few of them get together, maybe travel around on their horses and slay some trogs or some infidels or whatever and in the meantime suck in some normals. See where this is going? Right, you get a bunch of people named Corwin with funny accents.

Next time someone you know wants to go to the Ren Fest, go bowling instead.

– Oz

Everything is Permissible

There are very few rules about how Marauders work, with good reason. Rules are for things that always work the same. With Marauders, Storytellers and players have free reign to use whatever ideas suit them best. Marauders live in worlds of their own, and these worlds can be nearly anything. That's a lot of potential variety for games.

The real trick with using Marauders is not rules. It's telling a good story and making sure the players are all working from the same page. When dealing with something as dynamic and downright weird as Marauders, it's imperative that everyone understands what their particular game is about. This is true whether you're making heavy use of Marauders in your Tradition or Technocracy game, or if you're running a game with Marauders as players' characters.

Marauder Themes

The first and most important decision regarding the use of Marauders comes with their thematic element. Different troupes want to tell different sorts of stories. As a result, Marauders need to fit into specific roles so that they can move the story along or contribute to it in some fashion.

In more specific terms, what you do with Marauders may vary from game to game, but you should always keep an eye on what the Marauder represents and what it's supposed to accomplish to the players as well as the

characters. Typically a Marauder is adversarial, but like any adversary it can take many forms.

A high-action game, one centered around a lot of bang-up conflict, can use Marauders as flashy foes who're dangerous because of their Paradox-free wild magic. They change the world around themselves and generate vulgar effects without the consequences suffered by other mages. This means that with their magic they can outclass any Tradition mage of comparable skill.

In such a game, Maraduers don't have to make much sense; they'll be colorful enemies with a flashy "shtick" and the ability to throw out blazing hot vulgar magical death without flinching. The players' mages will have to duck, jump and haul out their best tactical plans in order to evade the flying lightning bolts, manticores and purple ducks, and successfully return fire. Like any lone magely adversary, such a Marauder should rely on proxies and flunkies to assist, but these'll take the forms of goblins, twisted mutants or other bizarrely reshaped entities or spirit critters.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, a creepy, personal horror style game can use Marauders more like a "there but for the grace of God go I" antagonist. The Marauder is antagonistic simply because his agenda conflicts with that of the group — or is too chaotic to understand and allow! Any mage could potentially become a Marauder, so the trick is to show the Marauder as bizarre, inhuman and, frankly, rather messed up. Then let the players delve into the mage's history and discover that he was once a pretty normal person — just like all of them. You can then use that opportunity to impress upon the cabal that, since nobody really understands what causes Marauders, the cabal might well fall down that same well one day.

In between, you'll find Marauders useful in various story arcs as reminders that not everything that your cabal deals with necessarily makes sense, and that individuals can switch from neutral to ally to enemy with little provocation. A Marauder might fill a role as a romantic interest, prompting the characters to find a way to cure him. A briefly lucid Marauder might have information about the cabal's enemies; the trick is in deciding whether the characters trust him. Perhaps the cabal could even track down a centuries-old Marauder who has lived without fear of Paradox since the Renaissance to garner some ancient bit of historical information. Remember, a Marauder doesn't need to fit into the story solely based upon the individual Marauder's characteristics — the mad mage could fit into nearly any role that any other mage or mundane could fulfill, while adding elements of uncertainty and insanity.

Method to the Madness

Marauders operate pretty much just like any other mages, with only a few differences. They still have Arete and Spheres, and generally use them in familiar ways. They experience Quiet, Paradox and Resonances differently, however, than the norm.

Quiet

Marauders have a permanent Quiet rating and a temporary Quiet rating. Generally, the more Paradox energy a mage holds when "going Marauder," the higher the permanent Quiet rating, but this isn't hard and fast. On rare occasions, sedate mages have spectacularly gone Marauder, while a few mages thrust into the Marauder state due to tremendous backlashes have still managed to retain lucidity. In general, a guideline of one permanent Quiet for every three points of Paradox at the time of the change over is a good ratio.

Every time a Marauder botches a vulgar magical Effect, one temporary point of Quiet is added to the Marauder's score. Raising this temporary Quiet rating causes the Marauder's delusions to become more intense — in effect, the Marauder is in a walking Mindscape and additional Quiet makes the Mindscape worse.

A Marauder can lose points of temporary Quiet by spending time with those who do not share his delusional version of reality. The minimum rating possible is the Marauder's original permanent Quiet rating, which can never be lowered.

Marauders whose Quiet exceeds five (either temporary or permanent) tend to disconnect so much from the real world that they simply "fade" into the Umbra, where they reshape ephemera into Realms of their own imaginings.

It's important to make a distinction between the *perceptual Marauder* and the *actualizing Marauder*. Each still suffers from "Marauder syndrome" and from the Quiet of the condition, but the outward or inward manifestation of that Quiet may differ.

The most common Marauders, and the ones responsible for the most fearsome destructive Dynamism, are actualizing Marauders — those who externalize their delusions subconsciously. Somehow, the Tellurian itself becomes wrapped up and twisted in the Marauder's madness and, in turn, causes the world around the Marauder to reflect this. This phenomenon makes the Marauder extremely dangerous, because the Marauder always carries "home turf" around with him. Should the Marauder launch a strike against some other mage, the victim will be hard-pressed to deal with the shifting reality. It's this sort of Marauder that is most famous for

Marauder Quiet

Quiet Score	Degree of Madness
1	One simple difference from the norm, or a few very minor details that are different. The US uses the metric system, for example.
2	A few simple differences, or one sizable constant difference. Prohibition was never repealed, for example. Robert Davenport of the Underground has a 2 Quiet, and believes his wife and daughter are still alive.
3	The world is entirely cosmetically different, though still based on reality in some way. The Marauder may believe he is in a different time or always in a certain place. At this point, the Avatar has to translate almost everything back and forth from reality to the Quiet. Revisionist southern historian General Barker fights back the Northern aggressors to this day with a Quiet of 3.
4	Reality has a few notable and major differences from the norm. Marauders at this level are leaning towards high fiction. Alternate histories and alternate levels of technology are common at a Quiet of 4. Highly efficient steam engines which power most things, or antimatter converters are examples.
5	The laws of physics go out the window at this level, as does common sense. Super-heroes, teenagers trapped in role-playing games and savage warriors of the Lost World are all possible at Quiet 5. Arr-On, Lord of Man-Hatan, rules the jungle ruins of New York City from astride his war mammoth and has a Quiet of 5.
6+	Marauders of this level of deviance are rejected from reality to the Umbra, and at higher levels of Quiet are eventually unable to leave even the Deep Umbra. Marauders with a Quiet of 6 or above are almost incomprehensible, gibbering servants to unknowable things — non-Euclidean palaces, intelligent swarms of crystalline material and worse are possible at this point. If you can imagine it, chances are it's not as alien as a truly high-Quiet Marauder.

screaming, chaotic attacks on Technocracy and Tradition strongholds alike.

Recently, however, mage scholars have isolated another aspect of the Marauder phenomenon: perceptual Marauders who internalize their delusions but rarely exercise any effect on the world at large. In some cases, these Marauders are wholly sapient, coherent and sane, but for some reason their perception of the magical world is skewed. Every attempt at magic winds up turning into an alternate effect driven by the Marauder's specific delusional problem. The Marauder might even be aware that his magics always go awry, but unable to do anything about it. Around such Marauders, the Tellurian remains largely whole but the Marauder's attempts to touch and tug the Tapestry become warped, from either the insanity, damage to the Avatar or whatever force engendered the Marauder in the first place. These Marauders still deflect Paradox and can still become more and more deranged by Quiet until eventually they vanish into Mindscapes, but their relative subtlety means that it's sometimes possible for other mages to deal with them — and that they can also be more dangerous because they're harder to detect.

Paradox

Marauders are not immune to Paradox, but they are resistant to its effects. Coincidental magic generates no Paradox, unless the player botches the Effect. Vulgar magic generates backlash as usual, but not automatic Paradox.

A Marauder's Quiet protects him somewhat from the effects of Paradox. It's not against the rules within their little "reality cocoon," after all. For every point in the Marauder's current Quiet rating, subtract three points of Backlash. What is left affects the Marauder; the rest is inflicted on the Awakened being (or, in some rare cases, even unAwakened unfortunates) who is physically closest. The Paradox that affects others always reflects the nature of the Marauder's Quiet.

Excuse Me, Can I Use Your Paradigm?

An interesting idea is that mages inside the Quiet warp of a Marauder can make use of the local reality for their own Effects. If the rules of the Quiet allow the Marauder to casually use particular vulgar Effects, who is to say others couldn't do the same? Common sense indicates that the Paradox from doing this would rebound to the nearest Awakened being (not the Marauder), just as if the Marauder had done it.

So, I Have This Video of a Guy on a Mammoth Downtown...

Given the extreme reality-bending of actualizing Marauders, one might wonder why nobody ever has any video tapes of, say, a flaming horde of madmen descending upon the Ramada and scaring the tourists (other than the usual live-action convention films, that is).

When a Marauder externalizes Quiet, the Tapestry essentially distorts through the Marauder's lens of perception. People and objects take on characteristics that mesh with the Marauder's delusion of reality. As the Marauder leaves, these elements change back. Essentially, the underlying idea — a messenger, a transportation device, a hand weapon — remains the same, while the manifestation temporarily changes. This also means that to people outside the Marauder's "sphere of delusion," these things seem outwardly normal; the Tapestry isn't distorted in that locale and so everything seems to have its normal characteristics. Inside, people suffer from the distortion as well, so they don't necessarily even know that anything is as it shouldn't be. A video cameraman enters an area of delusion, his video camera becomes something else (say, a set of skins and charcoal inkings), then when he leaves it's a video camera once more — and he's none the wiser.

Some Marauders *do* have the ability to enforce their delusional sphere on the Tellurian out of whole cloth, so that it's clearly out of place. Most Marauders of this sort are both very powerful and very, very deluded. They generally aren't even aware of what they do. Their antics either fall subject to a Technocracy cover-up or wind up in tabloids ("Aliens land in downtown Manhattan!").

Mages and other supernatural entities, because of their "perpendicular" connection to the Tellurian — that is, their state as beings marginally askew from reality as a whole — often find that they're aware of Marauder psychosis when nobody else is. Anyone with the Awareness Talent tends to recognize that something is wrong within a Marauder's sphere of delusion, although it may take three or more levels of Awareness to actually realize that what's going on isn't what *should* be real. Anyone already sufficiently divorced from the "real world" can fall into this category: Mages, vampires, ghouls, sorcerers, nutjobs....

Resonance

All mages have Resonance, that sense of otherworldliness that wells up from within them. It colors all their effects with the marks of their will. In Marauders, their will is constantly in full force, pushing magic through their Resonance in a continual effort to warp everything into their reality.

Resonance is used as a rough indicator of how strongly the Marauder's will is broadcast onto the world around him. A low Resonance indicates a fairly typical sort of Marauder, who makes no sense to onlookers as he interacts with a reality only he sees. A high Resonance Marauder makes much more sense to onlookers, as they're likely inside his version of reality and it seems perfectly normal to them.

Resonance increases from use of magic, and from investment of passion and self into magic. Marauders' constant use of magic coupled with their obviously deep commitment to their view of reality makes very high Resonance common among them.

Marauder Du Jhor & Static Dynamism?

Marauders always suffer from Madness Quiets... mostly. Depending on their Resonance traits, they may exhibit signs of Clarity and Jhor Quiets as well. Madness will always be dominant, however. Truly frightening and deranged Marauders might have all three types of Quiet.

Marauders always have Dynamic Resonance as their primary trait. Their Entropic and Static traits may never be higher than their Dynamic trait. The wills of Marauders are first and foremost concerned with matters of dynamism and change.

Madness to the Method: Using Marauders

"Truly great madness cannot be achieved without significant intelligence."

— Henrik Tikkanen

There are limitless possibilities for using Marauders in your **Mage** chronicle. Unfortunately for those in need of them, presenting comprehensive rules for limitless possibility is impossible. What can be done is to discuss possible rules and guidelines for use with Marauders that players and Storytellers can customize to suit their particular needs and definitions of "limitless possibility".

Beyond the need for mechanics to govern them, the most important consideration with Marauders is the construction of their Quiets. The Quiets of Marauders, in Storytelling terms, are genres. Storytellers can use Marauders to introduce nearly any sort of setting into their Mage chronicle they choose; from Hong Kong-style action or cartoons to alternate history or historical settings. Alternatively, you could use Marauders in their more familiar roles as unknowable and frightening madmen, with inscrutable motivations and seemingly limitless power.

One of the most interesting options for some is the use of Marauders as player characters. A game featuring a Marauder among other mages or an all-Marauder chronicle offer whole new vistas of insanity for **Mage** players, but requires a lot of communication among the players and the Storyteller.

What Can Marauders Do?

Storytellers are going to need to establish what Marauders are capable of in their game. To this end, two options are presented to define the mad. First is a set of rules to define what a Marauder can do, and what mages can do to interact with them, be it on friendly or violent terms. The other option is a more freeform approach, where the needs of the story define the capabilities of the Marauder.

Most players and Storytellers will choose an option somewhere in the middle, tweaking the rolls to better fit their style of play or using some or all of the loose guidelines. Some people, as ever, will make up their own additional rules. This last approach is in keeping with the spirit of Marauders, and is heartily endorsed.

Planned Insanity

Since Marauders exist in their own version of reality, Storytellers need to determine exactly what this reality is like for the mad mage. This Quiet is not something inflicted on the Marauder; it's a reflection of some part of the mage's will on some level. No one becomes a Marauder with a Quiet that's alien to them or that they aren't in some subconscious way making up.

Quiets ought to make some sense, odd as that sounds. They spring directly from the mage and his Avatar, not from an external source. So, there is a logical progression to Marauder-dom. A mage with no previous experience or knowledge of the wild west or western movies isn't going to become a gunslinging Marauder unless his Avatar has strong memories of that period.

Some Marauders are simply lone nuts who live by themselves in their Quiets. Their actions make no sense to anyone who doesn't know what the Quiet is. Other Marauders broadcast their Quiets constantly, a constant unconscious stream of magic trying to make the real world into their dream world. Sleepers don't even notice this change; for them the new reality is reality. For mages, on the other hand, it isn't so simple.

When another mage enters the area in which a Marauder's Resonance is broadcasting his Quiet onto the world, her will automatically struggles with the change. Mages know that reality is not set, and this knowledge allows them to resist becoming part of the Marauder's Quiet. When entering a Quiet warp, players make a contested Arete roll against the Marauder.

On a successful roll, reality reasserts itself via the mage. Normal reality radiates from her with a power equal to her Static Resonance trait. If her Static trait is greater or equal to the Marauder's Dynamic Resonance, the warp is nullified. The Marauder, of course, has no idea and behaves as a low-Resonance Marauder until the Mage leaves the area. Any changes the Marauder consciously made (made an Arete roll for) remain; the contested roll merely turns off the constant broadcast.

If the mage loses the contested roll, she becomes an analogue of herself as per the "rules" of the Quiet. She retains free will, unless the Marauder does something to usurp it, but is fully a part of the Quiet warp. The player may spend one Willpower and one Quintessence for one turn of lucidity, remembering that the warp is a lie and seeing reality clearly underneath.

If the mage and the Marauder tie the contested roll, the mage becomes a part of the Quiet warp only cosmetically. Her equipment and clothing will change to match the setting of the Quiet, but she retains full memory of herself, reality and the situation.

Just Shut Up and Spell It Out Already

•To be clear, the Quiet warp around a Marauder doesn't leave evidence behind as it moves, things revert to the way they were. There are exceptions, of course. Anything the Marauder specifically did with an effect stays, as well as anything changed as the result of the Marauder's Paradox Backlash rebounding to other mages.

• **Quiet** rating determines the level of deviation from reality.

• **Arete** and **Spheres** determine the changes that can be made, as usual.

• **Resonance** determines the strength with which Quiet broadcasts via Arete, warping reality.

Simple, right?

Two Marauders Walk Into a Bar...

What happens when the Quiets of Marauders overlap? There are a number of ways for the Storyteller to handle this, none of which is the best or correct way. Remember, with Marauders nothing ever happens in predictable ways. It's best to let the demands of the game dictate the answer to this question.

When two Quiets overlap, the Marauders usually do not notice. Events continue to translate into their view. If there is a difference of two or more between the Quiet ratings, the area around the two Marauders is a hybrid of their realities, favoring the stronger one.

Particularly cruel Storytellers may opt to increase the level of Paradox Backlash generated by Marauders in hybrid Quiets.

Use only one contested roll for any given scene. The mage can't just dive "in and out" until receiving a favorable result.

Spontaneous Lunacy

Storytellers and players whose games focus on the drama instead of the mechanics may want to consider handling Marauders in a more freeform fashion. This approach allows for more seamless play and puts the focus on the setting. It requires a lot of trust between the players and the Storyteller, though.

Marauders in this style of play are defined not by their attributes (though they should still have them) but by their genre. A Quiet warp is nothing but a mobile genre or setting. Your troupe now has access to genres outside the normal Gothic-Punk parameters, and thus all new themes, plots and just plain color.

How does your Marauder's world work? How is it different from the reality to which the players (and the characters) are accustomed? Most importantly, what is there to be gained from the difference in terms of game satisfaction? The answers to these questions are the things you use to define your Marauder characters. In play, you base the actions and descriptions on this information. The things that happen in play happen because the Marauder was designed to take the story a certain way, not because the dice rolled a certain way.

The Storyteller, without having too many rules to interrupt the flow of play, has to be very careful to treat the players fairly. Just because your players allow you to narrate scenes of crossing between genres does not mean you can disempower them in the process. Always allow players to react to things, regardless of your use of a rules-light system. Nothing will turn a player off like being told that something has happened to their character and they didn't have a chance to do anything about it.

This goes for players as well. It's easy to abuse a game when there are less formal systems being used to arbitrate things. Always remember to not do things that take away options from the other players, or step on the Storyteller's hard work.

A more freeform style of play can be great fun, but it often needs a lot of practice to get the group working well together. Don't expect it to work perfectly the first time. Something most people lose sight of when playing a freeform game is that in a story, failure is just as dramatic as success. A story where no one ever fails is stale, but many players want their characters to succeed all the time. As a player, coming up with a dramatic failure for your character can be great fun, and makes eventual triumph all the more satisfying.

Being Mad

There are two obvious ways to use Marauders as player characters. One is in a game where there is a single Marauder among other types of characters, and the other is the all-Marauder game. It is recommended that for the sake of sanity the all-Marauder game feature a fusion, where all the characters have the same Quiet. Storytelling a game with a different Quiet for each character is a colossal investment of brainpower — and, more importantly, the significance and novelty of the Quiet is lost when everyone has a different, conflicting world view. Imagine trying to set even a simple scene for a group of four players when each of them is seeing a different version of it.

The Lone Nut

Communication is the most important thing to have when playing a game featuring a Marauder among other types of characters. If all the players know that one of them is a Marauder, there needs to be a fair amount of input from all parties about the way the game is going to work. Coming up with a reason why mages would knowingly keep the company of a Marauder is the first step, though this ought to be a walk in the park for the average **Mage** players. Still, it needs to be a good reason. No one would willingly take Paradox day after day for nothing. Perhaps the Marauder was previously a dear friend or relative to the cabal. They could be researching Marauders, trying to study and cure their *mad companion.* Maybe they find the Marauder's version of reality useful or intriguing and they keep his company specifically for his sphere of delusion.

All of the players should have a say in the creation of the Marauder character, or at least veto rights. It's unfair to the other players who are expecting to play a **Mage** game to have to operate within an unusual genre, in the creation of which they had no say. Not everyone wants to have pulp mad science or space opera setting constantly intruding on their game if it isn't what they signed on for.

The Company of Madmen

A fusion of Marauders is possibly the most liberating choice for players of **Mage**, in terms of making the game into whatever it is you want. Looked at a certain way, playing a fusion is like playing whatever game you like, just using the **Mage** system. Keep in mind, though, that when playing Marauders losing sight of the themes of **Mage** is a danger. It's a challenge for the Storyteller to keep things within the parameters of **Mage** when the characters are cartoons. Some Quiets are less prone to this than others, obviously. Ultimately, however, if drifting away from the core themes of Mage is good for the game, then it's a good idea (though you may just want to play a game about cartoons if that's the direction you take).

Make Yourself Mad

Character generation for Marauders has only a very few minor changes from what **Mage** players are used to. Marauders do not have a Paradox rating. They instead have a permanent Quiet rating of one to five. Players simply choose their Quiet rating at character generation; a high Quiet is its own drawback.

Marauders always start with one dot of Dynamic Resonance *and* one additional dot of Resonance (which could indicate a second Dynamic dot).

Abilities, Attributes and Backgrounds remain the same for Marauders as for other mages. You don't have to take fewer or more dots; you don't have to automatically be stupid or befuddled.

Of course, the major consideration in taking Traits for a Marauder character is that the Traits need to fit what the Marauder can do. A Marauder who can't hold down a job is unlikely to have a *Resources* Background rating. A Marauder who lives in the jungle ruins of Manhattan probably has quite a bit of Survival Ability. This should be self-evident, but remember that a Marauder is in many ways a hybrid of two people: who the Marauder was before, and who he became as a mad mage. The Marauder's Abilities may reflect experiences and memories of a former life, unless the Marauder's Quiet is so strong that he doesn't ever remember being different.

Marauder Merits and Flaws

Given their "unique" perspective, Marauders deserve a few special perks or problems to set them apart or explain their individual foibles, just like any other mage. A Marauder might have just about any of these difficulties or boons....

Lucid Marauder (3 pt. Mental Merit)

Although this Marauder has a skewed perceptual framework, the Marauder's completely aware that something "isn't quite right." He realizes that somehow the world's translated from what it should be. He doesn't necessarily know what it is supposed to be, or why it's skewed, but he at least recognizes that wherever he goes, things are somehow off-kilter. This means that he may be more willing to listen when other mages try to reason with him or explain the nature of his problem.

Pre-Marauder Memories (2 pt. Mental Merit)

While the average Marauder doesn't remember anything before going nuts or — at the very most — puts old memories into the new perceptual framework, this Marauder still retains normal, unchanged memories of time from before going awry. This doesn't mean that the Marauder knows what he's doing, but he does realize that there was a time when his world was different. Depending upon the Marauder, he might also be Lucid (see above) and realize that the world went wrong on him. Alternatively, he may simply think that those old memories are fakes, hallucinations or just a time when the world wasn't like it's supposed to be.

Interface Blur (5 pt. Supernatural Flaw)

The Marauder's interface between Quiet and reality is blurred. In effect, the sphere of delusion doesn't always completely translate things, and sometimes people even realize that matters are horribly wrong. The Marauder still sees everything according to the internalized perceptual framework, but the externalization of that upon reality isn't complete. A Marauder who thinks he's in ninth-century Japan, for instance, might have a reality bubble where businessmen all wear the *mon* (crests) of their ancient samurai families and carry daisho (paired samurai swords), but still have powersuits and cell phones.

On the up-side for visiting mages, they gain a -2 difficulty bonus to their rolls to resist the Marauder's sensory intrusion.

Sanity Sink (3 pt. Supernatural Flaw)

This Marauder's Quiet tends to infect other mages, and his Resonance also subtly overwrites them until they become nothing more than pieces in his reality show!

Mages who enter this Marauder's sphere of discord have the usual chance to become entrapped or to assert their own vision of reality. For every scene, however, that the mage remains in the sphere of discord, the mage must make a contested roll of his highest Resonance Trait against the Marauder's Dynamic Resonance (difficulty 6 for both parties). If the Marauder wins, then the mage's Resonance starts to convert to the Marauder's. Once all of the mages's Resonance dots have been converted, the mage is wholly ensconced in the Marauder's reality, even after leaving the sphere of discord. (In effect, the mage becomes a new Marauder, sharing the Marauder's vision of reality.) Physical contact exacerbates this decline and causes the mage to make a contested Resonance check every *turn*.

A mage who isn't totally overtaken, and who manages to escape from the Marauder in question, regains his normal Resonance by the end of the story. A Mind or Prime effect can also defend Resonance and create a "reality bubble" to hedge out this effect, if the mages have enough time and insight to figure out what the heck is going on and how to combat it (time for some research rolls!).

Building a Better Schizoid Episode

Sure, Marauders walk around in a fantasy land. Some even broadcast it onto the world around them. They can only alter the world around them to the limit of their Arete and knowledge of Spheres, though.

There will always be discrepancies between the Marauder's vision of reality and what his Avatar is able to actually change, unless the Marauder *is dangerously* powerful and has a wide variety of high level Spheres.

Knowledge of particular Spheres goes a long way toward making the outside match the inside:

Correspondence ••• and •••• allow Marauders whose Quiets lead them to believe they are always in *the same* location to get around easily. To a Marauder who thinks he is always in Manhattan, it makes sense that he is able to be anywhere in the world easily. It's all New York, after all. This level is also of use to Marauders who are "omnipotent" or well-informed in their Quiets, as they can stay aware of events all over. **Correspondence** ••••• is a must-have for the truly demented, allowing distortions of space and direction. *Think* Escher or Lovecraft.

Entropy ••• can be used to favor certain forms of technology over others. *Internal combustion* may be unreliable, while fusion is highly efficient. It can also be used for more cosmetic alteration, for post-apocalyptic or wartime Quiets. Another use is to insure the success of certain people while punishing others with ill fortune. This has the benefit of promoting certain forms of behavior and punishing others. **Entropy** ••••• can do this more directly, by altering the actual thought patterns of people.

Forces •• and ••• are a must for any Marauder who wants to fly, a particularly common trait of Quiets. Also of note is that fact that by altering the properties of light, the mad mage can certainly make the illusion of his Quiet appear. All levels of Forces are obviously of great use for the standard displays of raw power common to Quiets.

Life ••• is common among Marauders who are superhuman or inhuman, or perhaps just not themselves any longer. **Life** •••• frighteningly allows Marauders to make *manifest* a Quiet where they live among a race other than humanity, or where humanity is physically different. Some may also manufacture *copies of* people significant to their Quiet from whoever is nearby, to fill the role when needed.

Matter is perhaps the most common Sphere for Marauders at any level. It allows for control over all the "props" of their Quiet. Buildings are as they are in the Marauder's world, along with clothing, technology and anything else. The applications are obvious and plentiful.

Mind at any level is the other common Sphere for Marauders, again for obvious reasons. People believe

what the Marauder wants, remember what she wants and do what she wants. With enough control of this Sphere, the Marauder does not need anyone else to back up their Quiet; people will simply see the world the lunatic sees.

Spirit •••• is without a doubt the most famous level of knowledge of a Sphere for a Marauder to have, though it has become less so recently. With it they were able to engage in their infamous acts of zooterrorism, charging into battle with all manner of mythic creatures and nightmare monsters. The great mythic creatures are largely loathe to come to Earth anymore, having retired to the spirit world for safety. Some Marauders have taken to using the wiser of the beasts as advisors as opposed to shock troops. More modern monsters seem to remain common, and tales of Marauder attacks featuring giant alligators and the like are not unheard of.

Unbirthday Party

Marauders are most commonly loners, for obvious reasons. How can they be expected to coordinate when they live in different versions of reality? Very rarely a few might come together, seemingly at random, to lash out at some perceived mutual foe. Even more rarely a group of Marauders might band together. Fusions of Marauders with similar views are not unheard of. The standard , though, has always been the lone nut.

Recently, this trend has changed and a troubling tendency toward group activity has been noted. The most widely known "faction", the Umbral Underground, has become much more tightly organized and less prone to self-destructive activities. The Bai Dai seems to have crumbled with the loss of nearly all of its members. A splinter group formed in a schism prior to the breakdown, Chaioth ha-Quadesh , survives and is active.

Observers of this phenomenon point to the Avatar Storm and the rejection of the maddest of the Marauders into the spirit worlds as the primary cause. The few remaining Marauders, it would seem, are the least deranged. Forced by these circumstances to restructure what little organization they once had, the cooler heads among them seem to have unified the mad somewhat, at least when compared to their previous organic structure.

Needless to say, Traditions and Conventions both are disturbed by the prospect of cogent Marauder leadership. The mad are far more dangerous when they're a little more careful, and the few self-aware Marauders who are running the show now are definitely targets.

The Umbral Underground

The Umbral Underground, or simply the Underground as it is lately known, is a tag which has been used for years by the Traditions to describe a loose confederation of Marauders and Marauder cabals with common goals and motives. The name is increasingly inaccurate, however, as the mad are as cut off from the spirit worlds as any other Awakened.

In the past, the UU were the textbook Marauder zooterrorist guerrillas: a half-organized agglomerate of summoners and super-heroes who blipped in and out of the Umbra to wreak havoc on whatever target suited them. With the appearance of the Avatar Storm and the increased lethality of spirit travel, leadership in the Underground no longer lies with the deeply mad residing in the Umbra, but with the most cogent of the Marauders left on Earth. This has led to a faction that seems *almost* structured, and operates with far more precision than ever before exhibited by the mad.

Today, the Underground has two goals: terrorism and the detection and education of Marauders. Underground cells are always on the lookout for more of their kind, poor bastards who would probably go up in a ball of electricity without someone there to hold their hand. There are a very small number of Marauders in the Underground just sane enough to be able to puzzle out the Quiets of their fellows and communicate with them in a fashion that translates properly.

Where are My Pants?

Keep in mind, not everything Marauders do is done on a conscious level. When discussing their motives and methods it may seem that they know what they're doing, but their Avatars are working double time to translate their desires and perceptions back and forth to get the desired end result. When we say a member of the Underground is locating and educating a new member, we don't always mean to say he knows it. To him, he may be saving an Allied scientist from the Ratzis and bringing him home to HQ for debriefing. The job gets done, but the Marauder doesn't always know what exactly it was he was doing.

Once the new Marauder has been brought to someone who can make sense to him, he gets filled in on the state of the ongoing conflict and his future role in it. The few members of the Underground who do this sort of education, particularly Robert Davenport, are very good at feeding their peers information in such a way that it fits with their Quiet and makes them want to fight the Underground's fight.

Against the Machine

The Underground breaks stuff, and they're very good at it. Their cells are crazy and very, very skilled at what they do. They raid Technocratic labs, disrupt studies and interfere with the operations of any faction or mundane organization they can find. The Underground is famous for its recent propaganda campaign, stirring up riots and insurrection the world over in an attempt to shake up world powers. Every bombing, protest, or other bit of chaos on national television makes their lunacy seem all the more palatable.

There also seems to be a rivalry between the Underground and the Chaioth ha-Quadesh. Both groups have verifiably taken action against each other, probably because of the wild difference in apparent morality. Even the Underground is put off by genocide, it seems.

What they don't do is attack Technocracy strongholds or other heavy targets. They prefer to make a lot of noise in the area and lure out agents where they can be harried and shaken up. Marauders or no, they know that kamikaze strikes on bases filled with turrets and cyborgs is a loser's game. The days when members were expendable loose cannons seem to be no more.

You Say You Want a Revolution? — The Umbral Underground

Underground cells operate in the field as mostly autonomous entities. Most cells have one or two members rational enough to coordinate their members in the short term. The overall organization is almost entirely by Robert Davenport, with help from some stationary "analysts" that he uses for training and planning. Davenport has managed to work himself or one of his gang into a leadership role in every other cell leader's Quiet, and the Quiets of many lone Marauders.

It's suspected that Davenport has inside information from sources in both the Traditions and the Technocracy. Underground actions in recent years have been uncomfortably well-planned to take into account ongoing activities of both major factions.

What follows are some of the most active of the Underground's cells, but certainly not all of them.

The Butcher Street Regulars

The Regulars are Robert Davenport's Underground cell. Highly mobile, skilled and mostly low-Quiet Marauders, the Regulars are some of the most wanted people in the world. Almost every member is capable of dealing with other Marauders' Quiet effectively. They serve as lieutenants for Davenport, coordinating the actions of other cells. The Regulars are always on the move, never using the same base or routes.

The Men of Gotham

A very loosely allied cell of well-connected vigilantes and power players, banded together because of their nearly identical Quiets. Some are independent (such as The Wolf), but at least 3 of this cell are a fusion of "super-heroes" operating together in Manhattan. The Men of Gotham work only in the cities of the north eastern US, having members in New York City, Washington DC, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Columbus and Chicago. Most of this cell's members see Davenport and the Regulars as fellow crime fighters.

The Knights of St. Stephen

A large cell, the Knights are the heroes of yore that you'd expect them to be, smiting their way back and forth across Western civilization. The Knights are actually made up of many smaller sub-cells, recently put into contact with one another by Sir Robert the Gray (Davenport), one of the greatest warriors of their order. The Knights can be found at the core of period festivals, reenactment groups and live-action games all over the US, Europe and Australia. The Knights also have among their number the occasional chiseled barbarian, ethereal fey creature or star-and-moon-hat wizard.

God's Arity — The Chaioth ha-Quadesh

Once, there was the Bai Dai — not really a faction so much as a label for a particular type of Marauder. They were known as mass-murdering, sociopathic genocidal madmen, even by Marauder standards. They had no organization, and didn't seem to really be aware of each other or even work together by design. It seemed more a matter of blind luck that any of them were in one place at one time. Their turnover was astounding, as they went out in orgiastic blazes of suicidal glory far too quickly to ever really develop a structure.

A few years ago, however, a cabal began organizing Bai Dai. The Sitrin, a cabal of militant occult apocalyptics, started rounding up Marauders and directing their actions under the sword and swastika banner of the Chaioth ha-Quadesh, trying to convince the maddest of the mad to control themselves somewhat, to live to fight another day. This didn't work very

well at first, and several of the Sitrin were killed attempting to work with Marauders who were too far gone for anything but mass destruction.

With the arrival of the Avatar Storm and the ejection of the most deviant Marauders from reality, the Sitrin had more time to devote to their war and less time wasted trying to herd maniacs. The Bai Dai, now the Chaioth ha-Quadesh , has suddenly become a frightening and dangerous force under the zealous leadership of the Sitrin. They strike without provocation at nearly any large group of people, killing without remorse. Airplanes, concerts and government gatherings are prime targets. The sudden rise to power of the Chaioth ha-Quadesh has hit the world completely off-guard, and the Conventions have been scrambling to deal with their attacks all over the world.

The Chaioth ha-Quadesh has a special dislike for Infernal powers and Nephandi, and has staged some of the most bloody and violent attacks against them ever known, ravaging entire city blocks to destroy a single Nephandus. Most members of this faction are violent, militant, and of a technical bent. Actions staged by the Chaioth ha-Quadesh are heralded by explosions and the sounds of heavy weapons.

The Sitrin

The members of the prime cabal of the Chaioth ha-Quadesh are driven militants, all. They're fighting the Last War on Earth at the direction of God himself, and want everyone to know. The Sitrin are always heavily armed and armored, their weapons and clothing bearing all manner of occult symbology. Members always have the sword and swastika logo of the Chaioth ha-Quadesh , and often wear a sword in addition to their firearms and other modern weaponry. The Sitrin make heavy use of divination in their analysis and decision-making, seeing directions from their master in everything they encounter. The appearance of the red star signaled a sharp increase in activity for both the Sitrin and their whole organization.

These people are fanatics. They make the Taliban look like a children's television show. They know as a fact that the future of humanity rests squarely on their shoulders, and that it is up to them to defeat the forces of darkness before they can swallow creation.

The Sitrin have no leader as such, though some of its members are more vocal than others in decision making, particularly Geoffrey. They make heavy use of the Internet and other modern communication networks to organize other cells. Most often, the Sitrin are on scene during an action to lead the other cells personally. They are all forceful and capable leaders, even when their troops live in a different world. Jihad translates easily into almost any paradigm.

P'o Chun

The P'o Chun, or "Broken Army Star", are a large band of Chinese bandits, mostly former military. They exist in a wasted, post-apocalyptic world where they remember the former glories of China and the men who caused her fall. A cross between Chinese myth and Mad Max, they strike from their mountain fortresses at the soldiers of the other "warlords" of China, hoping to see a return to the glorious age of the ascendant Middle Kingdom.

Stories from China have always indicated the P'o Chun were a nuisance and not considered much different from a mundane gang by the Awakened there. Recent rumors indicate that the P'o Chun may be receiving information from Chinese undead with similarly apocalyptic views.

Team 23

The favorite strike force of the Chaioth ha-Quadesh, Team 23 is easily the single most brutal and violent of any known Marauders. Appearing as huge armored brutes with obscenely large weaponry, Team 23 has systematically swept through entire buildings and left not a single person alive. Their members will spend hours combing a target area for even one survivor, just to make sure no one lives. Their magic is entirely technological and well beyond vulgar. They have been seen to use energy weapons, force shields and cybernetics. Their trademark technology is a pixelated teleportation gate that seems to only work when no mundane humans are left alive at the site of their attack.

Oddly, Team 23 members rarely attack other mages, instead preferring to take contact with them as an excuse to make small talk about kill counts and the best places to find ammunition. They boast often and loudly as to their preeminence over the other "clans" before returning to their vile work. The thought that these "clans" might be Teams 1 through 22 is a disturbing one for many.

A sampling of Marauders, from the leaders of the factions to the footsoldiers. This is intended to give the Storyteller both a sense of significant Marauders' status and a set of benchmarks for creating your own Marauder characters.

THE UNDERGROUND

ROBERT DAVENPORT

Background: Dr. Robert Davenport was a brilliant vascular surgeon and family man who made the mistake of turning down the Technocracy when they tried to recruit him. In the auto accident that was arranged to kill him and his family, he awakened and became a Marauder in one horrifying instant. His family and the Technocrats were killed.

Years later, Davenport finds himself the only man in a position to lead the entirety of the Underground. He has begun to overcome his reluctance to hold this position, and is both a leader and a father-figure to his faction.

Image: Davenport appears to be a man fast approaching his forties, and they've been forty very active years. His face and hands are tan and lined from time spent outdoors, and he is in excellent shape. His dark hair is cut short and has gone silver at the temples. His clothing and general demeanor project a sense of simplicity and utility, though he remains dignified and approachable.

Roleplaying Hints: You are, above all, a good man. You have many people that rely on you to be cool and have answers for them, and you take this very seriously. Your orders are followed because your people trust you, and you are careful to project this air of wisdom and authority. The things you do are not a joke: there is a war going on.

Tradition: None

Faction: The Underground

Essence: Questing

Nature: Caregiver

Demeanor: Director

Attributes: Strength 2, Dexterity 4 (surgeon), Stamina 3, Charisma 4 (paternal), Manipulation 3, Appearance 2, Perception 3, Intelligence 4 (analysis), Wits 4 (under fire)

Talents: Alertness 3, Athletics 3, Awareness 2, Brawl 2, Dodge 3, Expression 2, Intimidation 1, Leadership 5 (Marauders), Streetwise 2, Subterfuge 3

Skills: Crafts 1, Drive 3, Etiquette 3, Firearms 2, Melee 2, Stealth 2, Survival 2, Technology 1

Knowledges: Academics 3, Computer 3, Cosmology 3, Enigmas 4 (Chaos), Investigation 2, Law 1, Linguistics 2 (Latin, French), Medicine 4 (vascular), Occult 4 (chaos), Science 4 (physiology)

Backgrounds: Allies 2, Arcane 1, Avatar 4, Destiny 5

Arete: 5

Spheres: Entropy 2, Forces 2, Life 3, Matter 2, Mind 2, Prime 3, Spirit 4, Time 3

Willpower: 9

Quintessence: 13

Resonance: (Dynamic) Desperate 2

Quiet: 2

Davenport is the world's most self-aware Marauder. In fact, he *almost* knows what he is, sometimes. This self awareness is what makes him such a success at dealing with others of his kind. Other times, he thinks his wife and daughter, Maraya and Karen, are still alive. His Avatar often appears as his wife, and Davenport has been able to discern a lot about his situation from conversation with her.

THE WOLF

Background: The story goes that The Wolf was an apprentice to a Son of Ether in his former life. He was a pretty unremarkable scientist with a deep love for comic books, movies and any kind of action-oriented media he could get his hands on. It goes that he was a big backer of the thinking that mages were the shepherds of humanity, that they had a responsibility to look out for things. Being a young man, he decided to do something about it, and planned an elaborate scheme to become a vigilante. He designed a costume, a name, and some gadgets to help him keep the streets of Pittsburgh safe. He was promptly shot 5 times in the chest by a drug dealer on his first night out.

The destruction of his carefully planned fantasy world was too much for him, and in the last instant before the bullets tore through his body, the world forever changed for him.

Now, The Wolf is an urban legend in both his city and in nearby cities as an ally of The Men of Gotham. He never appears in the news, but the people on the street all know his name, and criminals whisper it for fear that he might be summoned if he hears.

Mages local to the area know of The Wolf and the other Men of Gotham, but are loathe to try to do

anything about what seems to be an obvious force for good.

Image: The Wolf is seen usually only as a flitting shape or looming silhouette. Those who have laid eyes on him describe him as a man of medium build with a shaved head, clad in trim black clothing and wearing a black scarf and goggles. On his hips he wears two revolvers with wolf's-head logos on the grips, and never speaks.

Roleplaying Hints: Loom. Pose. Everything is about drama. There is a right way to make an entrance and exit, a right way to leap from great heights and a right way to fire two guns. Always do the right thing.

Tradition: ex-Son of Ether

Faction: The Underground

Essence: Pattern

Nature: Gallant

Demeanor: Judge

Attributes: Strength 2, Dexterity 3, Stamina 2, Charisma 1, Manipulation 1, Appearance 4 (intimidating), Perception 4 (methodical), Intelligence 2, Wits 4 (calm)

Talents: Alertness 2, Athletics 2, Brawl 2, Dodge 2, Intimidation 3, Streetwise 2

Skills: Drive 2, Firearms 3, Stealth 1, Technology 3

Knowledges: Computer 1, Investigation 1, Medicine 1, Science 2

Backgrounds: Arcane 5, Avatar 1, Contacts 1

Arete: 3

Spheres: Entropy 3, Matter 1, Mind 2

Willpower: 5

Quintessence: 1

Resonance: (Dynamic) Shadowy 1

Quiet: 3

The Wolf believes he lives in a noir comic book world and is one of its known heroes. Criminals near him are more inclined to commit crimes, interestingly. There is never a shortage of people for The Wolf to fight. In The Wolf's world, the good guys tend to win. His enemies have horrible luck, while things always seem to go his way. "Good" people in his area also seem to have great luck. The Wolf always has the best place to stand, swing from, or drop from. He never looks foolish.

Chaioth ha-Quadesh

Geoffrey, General of Heaven

Background: Geoffrey was a great success as a journalist, considered one of the most gonzo of war correspondents by his peers. He fearlessly covered the bloodiest conflicts and relentlessly pursued the most dangerous men for interview. He was less well-known for his other role in life, that of an Orphan occultist. His insistence that something big was coming quickly grew tiresome, and his pages of economic and military data covered with numerological analysis went unread. He eventually faded from view both professionally and magically, to resurface a year later a hardened zealot and Marauder, with allies.

The Sitrin, Geoffrey's cabal, have spent many years building a terrorist army from the remains of the Bai Dai. He and his allies have been active on all the world's continents, in all the worst places, making things worse. He is thought to be personally responsible for the explosion of a passenger jet over Germany that resulted in the deaths of several key figures in the European Union and the slaughter of the entire staff of a CIA station in southern Mexico.

Image: Geoffrey is the very image of steely militant zeal, though the addition of his carefully groomed beard makes him seem more a crusader-knight than a stormtrooper. His movement and expressions are spare and minimal. His militant clothing is worn but well maintained. When angered, he cracks and becomes a screaming, purple-faced monster who forgoes weapons in favor of tearing men apart with his hands and teeth.

Roleplaying Hints: You are totally confident that you are correct in all things — you have God as your superior officer. Those that question you are questioning the Lord himself and endangering all humanity with their lack of faith. You see clearly what needs to be done, and you do it. Anything in your way is in God's way, and is dealt with in OldTestament fashion.

Tradition: Orphan

Faction: Chaioth ha-Quadesh

Essence: Pattern

Nature: Visionary

Demeanor: Judge

Attributes: Strength 2, Dexterity 4 (bestial), Stamina 4 (driven), Charisma 3, Manipulation 5 (overpowering), Appearance 3, Perception 2, Intelligence 4 (calculating), Wits 3

Talents: Alertness 2, Athletics 1, Brawl 2, Dodge 2, Intimidation 4 (intellectual), Streetwise 1

Skills: Firearms 4 (revolvers), Melee 3, Stealth 1, Survival 3, Technology 3

Knowledges: Academics 4 (political science), Computer 2, Investigation 4 (journalism), Law 2, Linguistics 3, Occult 3

Backgrounds: Arcane 3, Avatar 2, Contacts 4 (international press), Destiny 3, Resources 4 (caches)

Arete: 4

Spheres: Correspondence 3, Entropy 3, Time 3, Spirit 1

Willpower: 8

Quintessence: 9

Resonance: (Dynamic) Righteous 4, (Static) Clarity 1

Quiet: 2

(Madness) These are the end times, the Last War is at hand. The minions of darkness are all around, and the damned rule the earth.

(Clarity) Geoffrey lives in a world without doubt. He receives his guidance from the Archangel Metatron, The Prince of Countenances, and he trusts the Archangel's word like he trusts nothing else. The Metatron is never wrong, never misinforms, and never lies. Evidence that might make Geoffrey think he is doing anything but the right thing just doesn't exist.

Roy Baker, aka Bl∅∅dnyte

Background: Roy Baker was once a talented young computer game designer and Virtual Adept. Along with his friends, he was designing the ultimate game machine: a full-immersion VR combat simulation. It was to have the most advanced game AI, the richest world, and the most engaging play of any game yet, including the projects being worked on by other Virtual Adepts. Unfortunately, while Roy and the other members of Team 23 were plugged in to the game, something went horribly awry and they never came out. At least, they don't know that they did.

Image: A bloody, giant red suit of spiked powered armor, occasionally emitting red electrical arcs. A variety of oversized and menacing weapons are mounted on the arms and shoulders, along with the bloody heads of what seem to be demons. The suit moves with a frenetic sort of grace, until Roy thinks he's among friends. The suit then slouches a bit ,lazily, and the normally booming mechanical voice drops to a friendly electronic whine. Roy would never knowingly commit mass murder, though he has killed probably over a hundred people. It's just a game for him. He is ruthless with his gaming, however, and prides himself on his ability to clear a level.

Roleplaying Hints: Damn, this is fun! This has to be, hands down, the best game ever made, and you're a part of it. Live it up, act nasty and cause damage. You don't take it well when people insinuate that you are anything but the best. Anyone questioning your 'skillz' needs a demonstration of just how well you play this game. Deathmatch?

Tradition: ex-Virtual Adept

Faction: Chaioth ha-Quadesh

Essence: Dynamic

Nature: Child

Demeanor: Monster

Attributes: Strength 2, Dexterity 2, Stamina 4 (unshakable), Charisma 2, Manipulation 2, Appearance 2, Perception 3, Intelligence 4 (corner-cutting), Wits 3

Talents: Alertness 1, Athletics 2, Brawl 1, Expression 1, Leadership 2

Skills: Firearms 2, Melee 1, Stealth 2, Technology 3, Survival 1

Knowledges: Academics 3, Computer 4 (games), Enigmas 3, Investigation 2, Science 2

Backgrounds: Wonder 4 (Battle Armor), Contacts 3 (Internet gamers)

Arete: 3

Spheres: Correspondence 3, Mind 3

Willpower: 6

Quintessence:0

Resonance: (Dynamic) Violent 3, (Static) Virtual 2

Quiet: 5

(Madness) Roy thinks he's playing a highly realistic, very immersive first-person shooter with his friends via the Internet. The world is a well-rendered and exciting place, with lots of dramatic lighting and plenty of blood. There are demons and mutants everywhere (Sleepers) to kill for points, and sometimes to recruit as cannon fodder. Other mages generally appear as other players, though they can appear as level bosses or rival clan members if hostile.

(Clarity) Roy is not really aware of the passage of time, he sort of assumes he logged out recently and went about his business. He never thinks about it, honestly.

Chapter Three: Infernalism

It is better to be the right hand of the devil than in his path.
— Beni Gabor, *The Mummy*

Magic has always been a double edged sword. Throughout human history, every society has drawn a line between benevolent and malevolent magic. From the ancient Romans and the Chinese to the Cherokee and the Zulu, there has always been a distinction between soothsayers, healers or holy men and witches. Even modern science distinguishes between men like Einstein or Saulk and those like Mengele or Shiro Ishii. By and large, **Mage: the Ascension** deals with those willworkers whose goals are oriented toward the betterment — or at the very least, not to the detriment — of society.

This chapter deals with the other edge of the sword. Infernalists are those who bargain with and even serve powerful and malevolent entities in exchange for supernatural power. They are considered an abomination by every culture on earth; criminals even by the standards of those who walk in the twilight world of hidden lore and dangerous magic. This chapter examines these magical transgressors in detail, including why they chose to walk the road of damnation, the benefits which tempt them down that path, and why they are hated so.

Shaman or scientist, monk or magician, medium or miracle worker; regardless of their differences, all share the same hatred of the Infernalist. Just, however, as every Awakened faction has their own beliefs about magic and mystical enlightenment, so they also have their own unique reasons for loathing Infernalism. In addition, each sect has its own weaknesses and vulnerabilities to the temptations of darkness. Fittingly enough, *each also has its own way of guarding against damnation.*

THE NINE MYSTICAL TRADITIONS

Although each of the Nine Traditions do not agree on much — each holds wildly differing opinions on magical theory, current events and long range goals — they do agree that the act of serving malevolent entities *in exchange for personal power is a crime and should be* severely punished (even to the point of Gilgul and death). In spite of this agreement, there is no single body dedicated to guarding the Traditions against Infernal corruption. Each Tradition has its own way of doing things, and each is loath to expose its failings to others if it is not absolutely necessary.

While the groups discussed below have similar agendas, they do not always work well together. Hermetic pride makes House Quaesitor unwilling to admit that it might need outside help. The members of The Golden Chalice believe their Tradition has a bad enough image problem without offering their detractors documented examples to point to as proof of "crazed death cultists." Even the very existence of the Hei Guan Society and the Silver Blade are closely guarded secrets within their respective Traditions. As *younger mages come to power in the wake of the* Reckoning, this trend may change — already, members of the Virtual Adepts, Dreamspeakers and Celestial Chorus have demonstrated a willingness to work together — but for now, there is no official cooperation between Tradition inquisitors.

AKASHIC BROTHERHOOD

For the Akashics, the temptations of the Infernal are seen as illusions to distract one from the seeking of Akasha and Samadi. Overcoming these distractions is just one more step on the path of enlightenment. Of course, not every Akashic is able to overcome temptation. The Tradition's rather aloof master-student relationship means that young Brothers can sometimes fall victim to demonic influence without their mentor even noticing. The Brotherhood's Zen-like teaching methods also lead to potential members succumbing to Infernal temptation out of sheer frustration, seeking a shortcut to enlightenment or a faster means of gaining the destructive martial power that the Tradition is famous for.

Among the Brotherhood, policing of Infernal corruption is the primary duty of a faction of the Shi-Ren known as the *Hei Guan Society*. The Black Hats, as they *are often called in the West*, are an extremely subtle and secretive group. Most Akashics are unaware of their existence, and the official Shi-Ren doctrine is that the Black Hats are a myth. Prospective members are invited — no one ever asks to join the Black Hats — to enter the Society only after a careful and lengthy screening process which includes tests of character, morality and mental discipline. These tests are frequently of a Legalist nature, with additional tests oriented toward Confuscism, Bushido, or other religions and philosophies — Judaism is currently seeing a resurgence in popularity — depending upon both the background of the individual being scouted and personal tastes of the recruiter.

Agents of the Society travel from chantry to chantry, often serving a double role as diplomat or courier, observing for signs of corruption. In the past, agents would report any findings to their superiors, who would then dispatch one or more cabals (frequently including specialists from each of the Brotherhood's factions) to deal with the problem with more direct means. The disruption caused by the Reckoning has resulted in many Black Hats having to assemble such cabals on their own, and circumstances have even forced some members to create such cabals using non-Akashic members.

CELESTIAL CHORUS

Members of the Chorus see themselves as agents of a higher power, and Infernalism is an antithesis of everything they stand for. Demons are the servants of the Adversary, and many consider it their divine calling to seek out and purify that which is blasphemous and unholy. Whether this purification involves sword and fire or forgiveness and redemption depends entirely upon the faith and beliefs of the Choristers involved.

Even men (and women) of God, however, are vulnerable to temptation. Pleasures of the flesh are such a stereotype that few novices fall for such petty distractions any longer. More devious are those demons and tempters who masquerade as messengers of the divine,

bringing divine wisdom meant only for the target of corruption. In this way, demons feed the mage's ego and sows the seeds of sinful pride. Other demons attempt to engage Choristers in theological debate, trying to twist the mage's understanding of his faith into something corrupt and self destructive.

The Chorus lacks any official inquisitional body to police the Tradition for Infernalism and other corruption. Valoran and subsequent leaders' negative experiences with the formal Catholic Inquisitions during the late Middle Ages and secular witchhunters during the Reformation made them extremely wary of setting up such a group. Several of the factions that joined together to create the Chorus have a long history of hunting the Infernal. The widest spread is the *Sisters of Gabrielle*.

Beginning as an Apollo cult in ancient Greece, the Sisters have spread across the world, opening their doors to women of any faith. The modern Sisterhood recruits members from a wide number of sources — nunneries, sororities, street gangs, Shinto temples and the Girl Guides among others — and this wide diversity of backgrounds and creeds gives the group a great deal of experience, perspective and mystical skill upon which to draw. The Sisters frequently work with other Chorus sects, as well as with members of other Traditions as the need arises.

Cult of Ecstasy

The Code of Ananda, an ethic of personal responsibility and mutual respect, lies at the heart of the Cult of Ecstasy. In spite of the diverse beliefs and styles of the numerous sects within the Cult, all of them teach the Code's tenets to their members and insist that they be followed. Those who do not follow those tenets find themselves ostracized by the rest of the Tradition.

Demons who attempt to corrupt Ecstatics most often play on the mage's desire for new, unusual experiences with whispers of radical forms of consciousness-expansion. Others simply fall prey to the age-old trap of placing their personal wants and desires ahead of any respect for the rights or wants of others.

Traditionally, enforcement of the Code of Ananda is the responsibility of individual mentors or, in extreme cases, the Ecstatic representative to the Council of Nine (who also serves as the nominal leader of the Tradition). In the wake of the Reckoning and the disappearance — and perhaps death — of Marianna of Balador, the Cult lacks an ultimate authority to enforce the Code. Indeed, the recent destruction of Balador itself has played havoc with the Cult's already scattered ability to organize. Members now debate who — if anyone — should be named the Tradition leader. Some have advocated the formation of a new sect for the purpose of enforcing the Code of Ananda's tenets, but for now most Ecstatics oppose the idea.

Dreamspeakers

As shamans, the Dreamspeakers have a sacred duty to protect their communities from dark and malevolent spirits and those who serve them. Those Dreamspeakers who succumb to temptation and walk down the Path of Nightmares betray themselves, their calling and their responsibility to those they serve.

Desperation and anger are what lead most Dreamspeakers down the dark path. As their nations and families come under siege, be it Amazonian tribes massacred by mining companies or Rroma families caught up in European "ethnic cleansing", Dreamspeakers become willing to trade their souls for the power to mount a last-ditch defense or avenge the dead.

There is no faction of Dreamspeakers created to protect their Tradition from Infernal corruption. The Society of Dreams is simply another family to which the medicine workers belong, and as shaman it is the duty of every member to watch over the others.

Euthanatoi

To the Euthanatoi, every lifetime is a sacred and valuable learning experience. Every journey through the Wheel of life, death and reincarnation is an opportunity to advance upon the path of enlightenment. But not for the Infernal. Those who sell their souls to demons do so for all eternity. They are forever frozen upon the Wheel and can advance no further. Because of this, the Euthanatoi view Infernalism as one of the universe's greatest blasphemies.

It is both unfortunate and ironic that over the centuries, no less than three Thanatoic sects have fallen to Infernalist taint. The latest was the Consanguinity of Eternal Joy, an ancient Thuggee sect that slowly devolved into an insane murder cult. The Council of Nine declared the entire sect *barabbi* in 1997, and it has brought shame to the Tradition the world over.

This generation of Euthanatoi has sworn that Consanguinity's fall will never again be repeated, but older and more cynical Thanatoics can recall when similar oaths were sworn after the fall of the British Order of the Black Willow during the 19th century. Members watch each other like hawks, always looking for the signs of corruption or insanity, and members of the *Golden Chalice* are perfectly willing to kill any one who might bring disgrace to the Tradition. Today, there are said to be only three types of Thanatoic Infernalist — the very clever, the very novice and the very dead.

For the Record

In case it needs to be said:

No, the Euthanatoi are not Infernal cultists. No, they are not psychotic death worshipers. No, they are not deranged serial killers. No, they do not set off your character's "Detect Evil" power. No, they do not serve some ancient animistic culture's chthuloid embodiment of all that is corrupt and evil. No, their magic does not involve summoning hordes of undead minions to smite their enemies like some sort of fantasy novel villain. They are fate-mages, not crazed death-mages. For them, the natural cycle of death and decay is just one part of a greater whole. It is the pathway toward greater understanding of life and of the universe, not a goal in and of itself.

In other words, the typical Euthanatos as presented in **Mage** is a worker of karma, and only a killer by necessity, not by inclination.

Order of Hermes

Among the Nine Traditions, none cracks down harder on Infernalism than the Order of Hermes. The cornerstone of Hermetic magic and belief is that a mage reshapes reality through the power of *his* will. The very idea of selling one's self into slavery is the ultimate of blasphemies, and one who serves demons is unworthy of the name magus. Hermetics look upon their fallen brothers as abominations, worthy only of death and, if need be, Gilgul. Still, hubris is an ever-present threat for the Order, and some Hermetic demonologists are arrogant enough to believe that they are too clever or too powerful to be outsmarted by the devil (or at least too clever to be caught).

Traditionally, the job of policing the Order for Infernal corruption falls to *House Quaesitor*, whose inquisitors each serve as detective, bounty hunter and prosecutor in one. They investigate suspicions of Infernalism, drag those charged before a tribunal of House members and then present their charges. The tribunal then renders its judgment and carries out sentencing. When *House Janissary* became the Order's de facto secret police, they also took up the task of monitoring the other Houses for signs of Infernal corruption. But where House Quaesitor relies on due process of law, House Janissary favors covert assassination (frequently followed by the blackmail of any of the suspected Infernalist's friends or associates).

Recent events have left the Order vulnerable to Infernal corruption. The destruction of Doissetep left the Janissaries badly undermanned, with few experienced leaders to coordinate the House's secretive (and often underhanded) activities. The fallout from the recent Massasa War has left House Quaesitor with their hands full investigating House Tytalus for vampiric corruption. Compounding this is the Hermetic tendency to "keep dirty laundry in the family." When witchhunters from other Traditions come around, the Order tends to close ranks and stonewall while trying to deal with the problem quietly on its own. Together, these factors make it easier for potential Infernalists to slip through the cracks and avoid notice.

Sons of Ether

The Sons of Ether consider themselves the keepers of the utopian ideals that the corrupted Technocratic Union has forgotten. In the safe and forward-looking world which the Etherites envision, the demons who prey upon humanity have no place. Unfortunately, reality does not always live up to ideals.

The Enlightened Scientists of the Sons of Ether are as vulnerable to temptation as any other mage. There are always those who are willing to do anything to outdo or undercut a rival, as well as those willing to sell their soul for fame and fortune (or just for lab funding, if desperate enough). Others, especially among those referred to as "Mad Scientists", begin to believe that the ends justify the means when it comes to scientific progress and will stoop to any depth to advance their scientific theories.

In the wake of the second World War and Etherite involvement with German and Japanese war criminals, the Tradition created the *Council for the Enforcement of Scientific Ethics* to ensure that such atrocities never again stain the Sons' reputation. Agents of the Council are expected to go anywhere (in this world or others) to carry out their duties. Most are skilled investigators, usually focusing on forensics or psychology, but others favor a "jack of all trades" approach, mixing quick wits with a wide number of skills (including those of questionably legality).

In the past, those found in violation of Tradition ethics would be dragged before the Council for trial and sentencing. If necessary, those found guilty of Infernalism or joining with the Nephandi would be brought before the Tradition Council in Horizon for Gilgul. The Reckoning has made this much less practical and Council leaders have begun work on a machine that can replicate the effects of the Hermetic Gilgul ritual. Although the device is still in the planning stages, the Council hopes to complete it within the next few years.

Verbena

Every member of the Verbena is a sacred branch of the Tree of Life, and as such has a sacred connection with and duty to all life. Demons and their servants are like a cancer, corrupting all they touch and eating away at the

universe. As part of their duty, Verbena must cut out the cancer before it spreads and then heal the wounds left behind. Sometimes, branches will become infected and must be cut off before they can harm the rest of the tree.

During the early days of the Tradition, many members became consumed by the need for revenge against the Cabal of Pure Thought and made pacts with demons and dark gods. In response to this, Nightshade formed the *Silver Blade*. A formal witchhunt would have torn the Tradition apart, so the very existence of the Silver Blade was — and still is — a closely guarded secret, known only to the Tradition leader (Nightshade and her successor, Lady Charlotte Quay; a new leader has yet to be named) and a handful of her closest and most trusted advisors.

Because of their pragmatism and their unlikeliness to be mistaken for Christian inquisitors, the original Blades were chosen primarily from among druid judges and Nordic spae-crafters (earning them a place among the Twisters of Fate, for those Verbena who actually pay attention to such political divisions). Modern Blades still recruit from among those sects, but Caribbean Voudounistas, Zulu *isanusi* (witchhunters) and even modern technomancers find their way into the secret society.

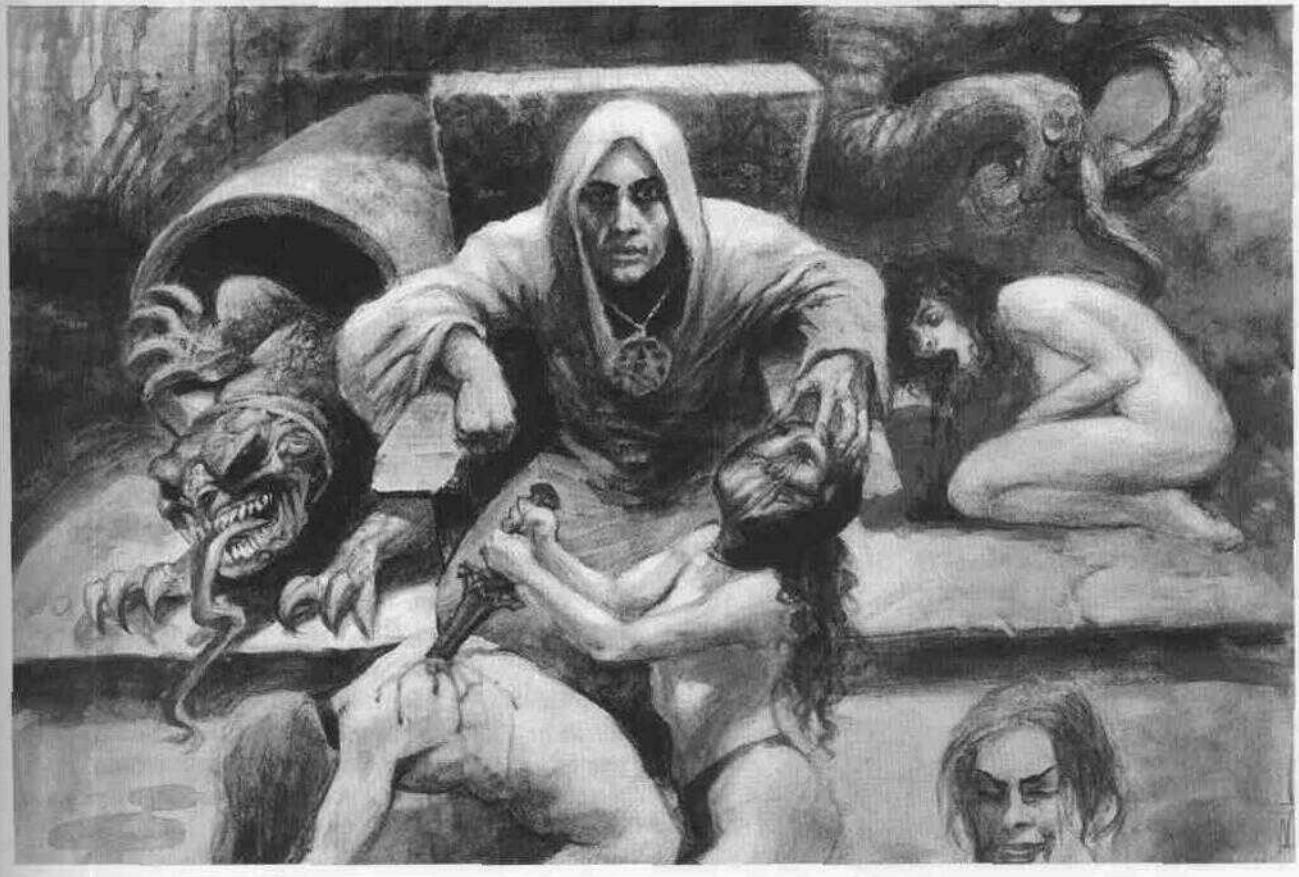
Because the Silver Blade is so covert, they never act publicly. While some prefer to anonymously forward evidence of corrupted Verbena to House Quaesitor or to the Golden Chalice, others prefer a more direct approach and simply arrange for the fallen mage to run afoul of the Technocracy or to meet with a fatal "accident."

A Question of Nomenclature

The terms witchcraft and witch, as used in this chapter, refer respectively to the use of malevolent magic cast specifically to cause harm to individuals and communities and to those who engage in the worship of evil spirits and deities for the purpose of learning such magics. It does not refer to the religious beliefs and practices known as Wicca. The term witchhunter is used to refer to those who hunt evil and Infernal sorcerers, and has nothing to do with the Papal or Spanish Inquisitions, nor with secular "witch finders" of 16th and 17th century Europe.

Virtual Adepts

Demons are computer viruses in the cosmic operating system. The Infernal is a threat to the Adepts' attempts to upgrade reality, regardless of whether those attempts focus on the Digital Web or the real world. Still, there is a never-ending line of young, headstrong and cocky Adepts who convince themselves that demons are just something older Adepts aren't good



enough to handle. Luckily, most outgrow this stupidity after surviving their first encounter with the Infernal — assuming they survive, of course.

On the other hand, a few survivors turn into thrill-junkies and spend the rest of their very short lives dancing with the devil. Less reckless Adepts typically fall to the Infernal as a result inter-Tradition politics and backbiting. In spite of (or perhaps as a result of) their continuous assertions of intellectual superiority over outsiders, many Adepts possess a cliquishness which would put any American high school student to shame. Members of these cliques cling to their positions with a quiet desperation and some are quite willing to sell their souls for the sake of status.

The Virtual Adepts lack any organized group devoted to policing the Tradition for Infernalism and other corruption. Over the decades, however, a number of *Cypherpunks* have found themselves providing security and counterintelligence services for their Traditionmates. Those who specialize in tracking the Infernal are often referred to as "virus hunters."

With their focus on data analysis and information collection, many Cypherpunks naturally gravitate to the role of detective and investigator (unsurprisingly, the majority of those NWO defectors who choose to join the Traditions find their way into the group), and frequently partner with a member of the Cyberpunks who provides muscle and intimidation as needed. These Virtual Adept investigation teams are often rounded out with a Chaotician or Reality Hacker serving as a technical specialist.

A *Barabbi* By Any Other Name

The Nine Traditions apply the term *barabbi* to any mage accused of entering the service of dark powers. While the same term refers to both Nephandi and Infernalists, the two factions are not synonymous. Ultimately, what every Infernalist seeks is power. The demons and dark gods they worship wish to eventually rule over the world and their servants wish to sit at the master's right hand.

Not so with Nephandi. The Nephandi and the unfathomable entities they call masters seek nothing less than the total annihilation of all which exists — even themselves. Universal oblivion is their ultimate goal. Those so-called "Infernal Nephandi" who worship devils only worship a mask meant to hide things no human mind could ever hope to comprehend. Even the most hard-core Infernalist considers the Nephandi a dangerous threat.

This hatred — and fear — directed toward the Nephandi should not be misinterpreted as some sort of redeeming quality on the part of Infernalists. Instead, it is more akin to the hatred a prison full of murderers and rapists feel toward a child molester in their midst. There are simply some things that offend even the twisted sensibilities of the damned.

The Technocratic Union

Considering how secular the Technocratic Union is, one can almost understand the stereotype of NWO administrators loudly proclaiming that demons don't really exist and are just something mages concocted to frighten the ignorant. Needless to say, Technocrats who are that naive don't last very long in the Union, let alone rise to any position of authority.

The Precepts of Damien, the code under which the Union has operated since its foundation in the 19th century, require the protection of the unenlightened and the destruction of those "reality deviants" which threaten the Union's creation of a safe and orderly scientific utopia. That includes the diverse collection of beings classified as Extradimentional Entities — ghosts, faeries, spirits, aliens, umbrood and, yes, demons. Still, Technocrats are vulnerable to Infernal temptation. There's always someone who can convince himself that the ends he seeks justify any means, no matter how horrific, to achive them. Any sense of personal or scientific ethics go out the window as the Scientist becomes increasingly fixated on his final goal, be it wealth, power, or the next scientific breakthrough.

Although the factions within the Union work together toward common goals, each Convention jealously guards its autonomy. Because of this, each has their own department assigned to the duty of finding and eliminating outside influence, including the Infernal and other Extradimensional threats. Given the Union's frequent use of mixed-Convention Amalgoms, however, members of these departments often find themselves working together.

Iteration X

For all of the chaos and destruction it has caused, the Reckoning may very well have saved the Clockwork Convention's soul. Over the past several decades, the Computer which lies at the heart of the Autochthonia machine realm has exerted a growing influence over the Convention. By the late 1990s, many earthbound Iterators quietly wondered if the Comptrollers who led the Convention had become nothing more than servants and puppets of the Computer.

Two items in particular have been cause for worry: the Computer's dictate forbidding the Convention to study Dimensional Science, and the frequent use of Digital Enhancement Implants (see page 216 of **Guide to the Technocracy**) to replace those portions of the brain which govern moral judgment and long term planning. Together, these two items have resulted in a Convention highly vulnerable to Extradimensional infiltration and corruption. DEI-equiped Ciphers were highly susceptible to any Infernal command, no matter how immoral, made to look or sound like orders from a superior. Those members who were compromised remained almost undetectable among Iteration X strongholds.

Now that the Avatar Storm has severed communication between Autochthonia and earth, however, many of the more independent Iterators have begun what they see as a long-overdue housecleaning. Plans to insert the new Anode DEI implants in all new Convention members were delayed until less invasive models could be manufactured, and BioMechanics have already begun removing many of the older DEI's and where possible replacing the missing brain tissue with Progenitor-grown replacements. With the ban on Dimensional Science no longer enforced, a wide array of experimental devices and weapons designed to detect and destroy Extradimensional Entities are in development.

With their razor sharp minds and keen grasp of logic, *Statisticians* make formidable detectives and investigators. Many members are often as skilled at gathering information as they are at data analysis and event forecasting. Because they are responsible for much of the Union's long term planning, it was never feasible to implant Statisticians with DEIs. As a result of these facts, the Statistician methodology has been responsible for policing the Convention for outside infiltration and internal corruption (usually while partnered with a well-armed TM Manager or a cyberetically-enhanced BioMechanic) . Over the decades, agents have tracked down Infernalists and other traitors using only deductive reasoning where others would have had the benefit of basic Dimensional Science devices. Even now, many prefer not to use such devices simply as a matter of pride.

New World Order

As one might expect, policing of the Union for Infernal corruption is an activity which falls squarely under the New World Order's rather wide umbrella. In a typical scenario, the Ivory Tower will analyze data collected by Watchers and based on their findings. Operative teams will then be dispatched to deal with the situation.

Of course, things don't always work as planned, especially in the wake of the Reckoning when resources are sometimes stretched thin. More often than not, agents are finding themselves forced to multitask. Watcher journalists, private investigators and security consultants are placed in the position of having to eliminate the Infernalists they uncover on their own, either through force or by finding a way to manipulate a third party — the police, witchhunters or even a Tradition Cabal — into doing it for them. Ivory Tower psychologists and forensic scientists find themselves out on the streets having to dig up their own leads and evidence to analyze as they track down dangerous cults. Men in Black learn to think on their feet as they become detectives as well as enforcers in their hunt for demons. This necessary increase in personal initiative is aggravating a pre-existing division between those agents in the field and those who sit behind a desk. While bureaucrats chastise mavericks who fail to follow proper procedure, field agents grow increasingly disgruntled with webs of red tape which may one day get them killed.

Progenitors

Tracing their roots back to Victorian Era monster hunters, the members of *Damage Control* have a long history of cleaning up after other Progenitors' mistakes, be they escaped lab animals, viral outbreaks or stolen bio-weapons. During the Union's post war purging, what began as a loose fellowship began to formalize into an organized department which drew upon members of all three Convention methodologies. Once a threat is contained, DC agents track the problem to its source and investigate those responsible. Scientists who have been corrupted by Extradimensional Entities, have become mentally unstable or whose curiosity has simply outpaced common sense find their labs raided and their research seized. By the 1960s, Damage Control found themselves in possession of a large stockpile of "ethically questionably" biological material, ranging from mind controlling drugs and freakish human-animal amalgams to symbiotic biotech body armor and Code: Ragnarok-level plague weapons.

When the Pogrom was started in the 1960s, Damage Control was ordered to begin using its stockpile as shock weapons against the Traditions. Many found this distasteful, as the stockpile was only maintained so that Damage Control could study the specimens and develop ways to neutralize them if anyone else developed similar creations. Only the most mundane and least dangerous creatures were ever authorized for field use, but the order still generated an undercurrent of discon-

tent. Even more unsettling, FACADE Engineer members were ordered to begin reverse engineering certain creatures so that more of them could be constructed.

With the Pogrom's suspension in the wake of the Reckoning, Damage Control's leadership has quietly begun destroying parts of their stockpile and "misplacing" evidence that some of the more dangerous items exist. Meanwhile, their field agents have returned to their original duty of monitoring the Convention for corruption and insanity.

Syndicate

Regardless of what outsiders may think of them, members of the Syndicate are as committed to the goals of the Technocratic Union as any other Convention. Still, problems arise. Although the *Special Projects Division* is the Convention's smallest methodology, they have become the most corrupt.

SPD is the Syndicate's research and development branch, and in true corporate fashion the methodology's leaders subcontract this work out to other companies. Typically these companies are ones owned and run by members of the other Conventions (NWO owned telecommunications conglomerates, Iteration X computer and munitions labs, Progenitor pharmaceutical companies, Void Engineer vehicle manufacturers), but SPD is also willing to use third parties which have no connection to the Union. Unfortunately, many aren't very picky about the nature of those to whom they subcontract and will work with anyone if the price is right.

While many of these questionable companies are simply fronts for organized crime, drug cartels and terrorists (or even shell companies which only exist on paper so that Syndicate members can syphon SPD funds into their own pockets), others are run by Tradition mages, vampires, Nephandi, demons, Infernalist cults or worse. While most SPD members are simply salespeople for these companies — spending their SPD budget and earning a hefty commission at the same time — willing to turn a blind eye to questionable activities, others have been fully corrupted by the dark forces they serve.

Convention security, both internal and external, falls to the *Enforcers* methodology. While the Enforcers are often stereotyped as criminal legbreakers and thugs, only a third of their number have any connections to organized crime. The rest are divided between legitimate law enforcement agents and private security specialists. Most are skilled detectives with the ability to move among a wide range of social strata, from back-alley gambling parlors to $10,000-a-plate Hollywood fundraisers. If the Enforcers have a major weakness, it is the "Green Wall of Silence." Syndicate business is Syndicate business, and members frequently become tightlipped when it comes to discussing Convention corruption with outsiders.

Void Engineers

As earth's first line of defense against alien hordes and extradimensional infestation, the Void Engineers tend to take a poor view of those who "sell out" to the other side. Still, the stress and danger of their work does lead to corruption. When trapped in Deep Space and facing what looks to be certain death, some are desperate enough to make deals with the devil just to survive. Others return from extended journeys to unknown corners of the world, unexplored dimensions or even the depths of the human mind having found new masters to serve.

The Void Engineer's *Neutralization Specialization Corp* are the Union's foremost experts in dealing with Extradimensional Entities, including the investigation (and when possible, the rehabilitation) of humans who have been corrupted by them. Recruited from such groups as the USAF Office of Special Investigations and RAF Air Section 2, NSC field agents are expected to act as soldiers as well as investigators and spin doctors.

Because of their experience in dealing with Extradimensional possessions and dangerous cults, the NSC has been given the task of investigating those Void Engineers who are suspected of having been compromised by outside forces. Augmenting the NSC are the members of the *Department of Psychological Evaluation and Maintenance.* These psychologists and psychiatrists stand on the cutting edge of Enlightened mental therapy and continue to work on ways to treat and cure those who have been mentally contaminated by Extraterrestrial Entities (those who have made Infernal pacts). While reliable methods of treatment remain elusive, experiments with dream therapy and hypnosis (i.e., Seekings) have shown enough promise to warrant further research.

For more information on the Technocratic Union and its factions, see **Guide to the Technocracy**.

Infernalism Among the Crafts

The numerous Crafts scattered across the globe are a diverse lot and their attitudes about the Infernal are equally diverse. Some are dedicated enemies of the Infernal, while others see them as a necessary evil. Some Crafts are even *full fledged Infernal cults.* Space restrictions make it impossible to detail every single Craft and its opinions on the Infernal. Below are listed some of the more prevalent, the more well know or simply more interesting sects.

What's a Deition Doing in Itty Enlightened Science?

Many Technocrats and sympathizers fervently *don't believe* in the manifestation of the Infernal — they classify it with the same stuff as religion and "magic." The experienced agents who come away with personal encounters with the paranormal may still be skeptical, and many continue to refuse to believe in demons and possession.

The Technocracy leadership recognizes that an agent who's been exposed to the Infernal probably isn't quite the same afterward. As a result, agents who deal with Infernal threats tend to find themselves stuck in small amalgams and constantly assigned to similar cases — a sort of "Infernal X-Files," if you will. These agents operate under a great deal of pressure and skepticism; their own divisions deride their reports, but the funding always seems to come in on time.

Operating as a demon hunter in the Technocracy is a crazed and thankless job, but someone has to do it. Meaning that it's a perfect job for your troupe of Technocracy-loving players....

For inspiration on an agent of reason hunting the supernatural, you need look no further, of course than the *X-Files*, but you should also check out movies like *Split Second* and *Silent Möbius*, as well as the excellent game *Delta Green* (yes, we're actually recommending a game book that we don't publish).

The *Ahl i Batin* have long been enemies of the Infernal. For centuries, the Subtle Ones battled a succession of Infernal warlords and devil-kings until the final defeat of Al-Malik Al-Majun Ibn Iblis and the destruction the brass city of Irem marked the foundation of the Web of Faith. With the rise of Islam, the Infernal was no longer an ever-present threat, and many Batini grew complacent. Some even fell victim to pride, believing themselves so pure as to be immune to corruption. In this way, many Batini fell to the ranks of the Infernal and even the Nephandi.

Modern Batini learn from their predecessors' mistakes and are ever wary of Infernal trickery. Still, as recorded in the Koran, even Ifrit (demons) may find salvation through submission to Allah, becoming one of the Righteous Djinn. The Batini seek the Unity of all things, and even the Righteous Djinn have a place within that Unity. But, for those who serve Shaitan, there is only death and damnation.

By virtue of their lack of organization and disdain for "conventional wisdom," many *Hollow Ones* may find themselves damned before they even realize it. Their catchall do-it-yourself magical style leads many to dabble in forms of magic best left alone. Others develop nihilistic worldviews that lead them to sell their souls without a second thought or even fall in with the Nephandi. Many young Hollowers are naive enough to believe that demons and their ilk are just ghost stories and urban legends, meant to scare away those who are too weak-willed to think for themselves. Those Hollowers who survive their first encounter with the Infernal know better.

Like the Celestial Chorus with whom they are now allied, the *Knights Templar* also consider it their holy duty to root out and destroy the Infernal. The sect's history, however, greatly influences how they go about such activities. Because the original Templar order was broken by false charges of heresy and demon worship, the modern Knights conduct any investigation of possible Infernalism with the utmost thoroughness and discretion. Templar inquisitors typically work in teams of three and will never level a charge of Infernalism unless all three are sure of the accusations and have proof to back it up. Once the Infernal has been found, though, a Knight will attack with all the force he can muster.

By definition, the *Wu-Keng* are an Infernal cult and have been for centuries. Each member of the Craft serves as a concubine to her demonic master and is dependent upon him for her magic and other powers. In the wake of the Reckoning, however, many younger Wu-Keng have found the strength of will and the opportunity to rebel against their brutal "husbands." Taking up the study of spiritualism, fortune telling and other "peasant magics" that do not depend upon Infernal instruction, they now seek to decide their own fate in the world.

Still, this new-found independence is not without risks. It has forced the young renegades into hiding, and some have chosen to throw their lot in with the Verbena or the Dreamspeakers. Others prefer to rely only upon themselves, while a few are so desperate as to look for new Infernal masters.

The *Wu Lung* continue to see themselves as a part of the Celestial Bureaucracy (even if the Technocratic Union has, seemingly, usurped the Dragon Wizards' rightful position for the time being). As such, they have a duty to see that the universe continues to operate in a proper and orderly manner. While demons and devils have their place in the universe, that place is not as the master of one of the Celestial Bureaucracy.

An agent of the Celestial Emperor, a member of the Wu Lung has the right to demand service from demons. To actually place service toward a demon ahead of one's duty to the Celestial Emperor, though, is seen as the highest form of treason and deserves nothing less than death.

For more information on the various Crafts, see the **Mage Storytellers Companion, Dragons of the East, Sorcerer** and **Lost Paths.**

And Justice For All

When a mage is accused of Infernalism, one of two things will typically happen: Either the witchhunter will simply try to kill him outright, or he will be brought before a collection of his peers for judgment. Vigilante justice is fairly straightforward and shouldn't require much explanation. Court proceedings are, of course, more complicated. How such things are carried out depends on several factors, including which factions are involved and who is being charged.

The Devil Inside

Almost every culture has stories of people who have been possessed by evil spirits, suffering great mental torment and even forced to commit acts of cruelty and blasphemy. Spinning heads and speaking in tongues have become cliché, as demonic possession in the 21st century tends to be subtle — at least at first.

Mages may be able to detect the early signs of possession through use of Spirit or Mind magic — assuming a willworker knows what she's looking for. Curing someone of demonic possession is somewhat more difficult. Exorcisms, through the use of Spirit or Mind magic, can free a victim of his demonic hitchhiker. Unfortunately, the longer the victim has been possessed, the more difficult such a procedure becomes.

The Akashic Brotherhood, Celestial Chorus, Dreamspeakers and Void Engineers have done the most work in this area, each in their own unique way. The three Traditions have access to a vast number of religious rituals, and over the past century have augmented this with techniques learned from modern psychotherapy. In particular, the Void Engineer Department of Psychological Evaluation and Maintenance has extensive experience in treating extradimensional infestation and assault, using advanced chemotherapy and experimental psychological probes.

The Technocratic Union's system of justice is heavily influenced by the Napoleonic Code. The accused will be sent before the nearest Symposium, and the local heads of the five Conventions will relentlessly question him until the entire five member panel is satisfied as to the agent's guilt or innocence. If a Symposium member is accused, she will be sent before a similar panel composed of three Masters. This system is meant to be a purely rational one, drawing its justification from the dictates of pure reason. It does not show consideration for rank or privilege, nor does it discriminate based on gender or ethnicity — in theory, at least. As with any human system, politics eventually rears its ugly head. Patrons shield favored agents, supervisors look the other way in exchange for favors, and allowances are made for this week's star wunderkind. On the whole, Technocratic justice tends to be swift, efficient and fair, but there will always be those who finesse the system.

Among the Traditions, justice tends to be a hit-or-miss affair. Each Tradition prefers to handle things "in house," and the system of favors, privilege and allowances is even more rampant. Tradition justice was a jumbled mess until after the Second World War when, at the urging of the Sons of Ether, the Council of Nine adopted a Napoleonic-style system in which a multi-Tradition Tribunal would judge cases. This system continues even in the wake of the Reckoning.

A Tribunal is made up of at least five mages, selected from among those who are available and willing to serve. Traditionally, Masters — or in important cases, Archmages — would make up a Tribunal, but the Avatar Storm has made it so that the majority of modern Tribunals are staffed by Adepts and Disciples (and in at least one recorded case, an Initiate). As with Symposiums, the members of the Tribunal question the accused until each member reaches a decision. The primary difference between the two forms of trial is that Tribunals allow for the accused to have legal council— a person familiar with Tradition law and custom — present. There are no prosecutors, save on the extremely rare occasions where an entire chantry or sect will be tried — often in absentia — for high crimes.

If the accused is found guilty, then the Tribunal or Symposium will also pass sentence. Among each side, punishment is divided into four broad categories.

• **Censure:** The mildest form of punishment. For a proscribed period of time, the mage is placed on probation. His activities — travel, associations, use of certain kinds of magic — are restricted and he is placed under the supervision of a superior. The mage may also be assigned a task of some sort as punishment or penitence.

• **Ostracism / Re-education:** The mage is banished from Awakened society. The length of the sentence varies, but is never less than a month. Any who associate with the renegade risk Censure. Branding, the act of spiritually marking the mage's avatar and aura, is frequently applied in conjunction with Ostracism. A mystic sigil identifies each crime the mage has been convicted of, and may be detected by anyone with Mind, Prime and Spirit magic. The Technocracy, in contrast, will send agents through psychological re-education and social conditioning (see **Guide to the Technocracy**, page 89) to eliminate the deviant behavior. Branding is not feasible under the Technocratic paradigm. Instead, details of the re-education are red-flagged in the agent's permanent record and forwarded to any superior to which he is assigned.

• **Execution:** Death sentences are reserved only for the most serious of offenses — Infernalism among them. The method of execution varies from group to group. The standard method for the Technocratic Union is Lethal Injection, although the Void Engineer Border Corp Division prefers to use military-style hangings or firing squads whenever they can get away with it. Beheading is common among the Traditions, but there are records of everything from poisonings to death by cursing — one Tribunal even ended with the condemned being turned to stone. Occasionally, the Order of Hermes, Sons of Ether or Akashic Brotherhood will allow a criminal the opportunity to commit suicide so as to avoid the dishonor of execution.

• **Gilgul / Mindwipe:** Gilgul is the ultimate punishment a Tradition Tribunal can inflict upon a mage, and it is reserved only for the most corrupt and malevolent (captured Nephandi are almost always sentenced to this punishment). Working in concert, several Masters of Spirit (technically, only one is needed, but traditionally at least three perform the rite in concert) destroy the condemned mage's Avatar, leaving him a powerless husk. Although the rite does no physical damage, it often leaves the subject mentally scarred or even as a mindless vegetable. The Technocracy employs a similar procedure known as Mindwipe. The prisoner's psyche — and with it his Genius — is completely destroyed on a subdimensional level (requiring Mastery of Mind and Dimensional Science). The automaton left behind will often have a new — and extremely loyal — artificial psyche implanted within. Granted only moderate intelligence, the former criminal is then assigned a simple job which does not require much creative thought.

The Practical Witchhunter

Just as each culture has produced its own version of the witch, each also produces its own version of the witchhunter — one who considers it her calling to protect the community from malevolent sorcerers and their ilk. Such duties are not undertaken lightly. Witchhunting is a dangerous profession, and few who war against the Infernal live to see old age. Those who are willing to rise to the challenge may find the following advice helpful.

• **Abilities:** Two skills are paramount to the witchhunter, Investigation and Occult (Infernalism). The ability to defend one's self is also important. Regardless of whether the character favors a flaming sword, a .357 Magnum or a solid right hook, some combination of Brawl, Dodge, Melee and/or Firearms may be all that stand between a witchhunter and an early grave. Skills such as Academics (anthropology), Awareness, Enigmas, Etiquette, Linguistics, and Streetwise may also prove helpful, along with Intimidation or Subterfuge, depending upon the character's investigative style. Certain witchhunter groups may require that their members possess certain skills — Law for members of House Quaesitor and the Hei Guan Society, for example.

Technocrat witchhunters (known alternately as RD — Reality Deviant — Specialists or Internal Investigations, depending on the agent's focus) use RD Data (Infernalists) in place of Occult. Skills such as Academics (logic), Science (forensic pathology) and Science (psychodynamics) are also common. More in-depth descriptions of these abilities may be found in **Guide to the Technocracy**.

• **Backgrounds:** Allies, Contacts, Influence and Resources are all useful tools in the witchhunter arsenal. Alternate Identity and Retainers (from **The Bitter Road**) may also be helpful. Library can provide a valuable source of information on demons and their followers, and Wonder can provide the character with highly specialized tools and weapons. Technocrat characters will find the new Backgrounds in **Guide to the Technocracy** useful.

• **Magic:** For the witchhunter, magic serves two primary purposes: finding Infernalists and fighting them. Divination (Time ••), scrying (Correspondence ••) and the ability to know the minds of others (Mind • and ••) are the most common methods of seeking out fallen mages. Magic allows witchhunters to battle Infernalists (Entropy, Life, Forces), as well as take the fight directly to demons (Spirit ••). Many witchhunters also craft weapons for the specific purpose of battling the unholy (Prime •• augmented with Matter).

Running With The Devil

By definition, an Infernalist is anyone who knowingly and willingly seeks out and deals with demons. By both Tradition and Technomancer law, such activities are prohibited and punishable by death. Such declarations work much better in the black-and-white world of theory, however, than in the shades-of-gray practical world.

Infernalism falls into four broad categories, with opinions on the ethics of each stage (as well as on the level of punishment which should be meted out to each offense) varying from group to group. Further muddying the issue are the political nuances which impact every society, even the Awakened. Powerful mentors have been known to shield favored students from investigation or to arrange for leniency for those found guilty, and rare is the Master or Archmage who has not traded favors with demons at least once in his Awakened life.

The first category of Infernalism isn't really Infernalism at all. *Demonology* is the study of demons, devils and other wicked spirits. Among some mages, it also includes the summoning and control over such entities. An Infernalist's relationship with demons is either feudal (obligation to a superior), worshipful (loving — or at least fearful — devotion to a master) or that of a puppet (little or no freewill on the part of the servant). In direct contrast to Infernalism, it is the Demonologist who commands the demon.

The study of demons is most prevalent among the Celestial Chorus, the Dreamspeakers, the Order of Hermes, the Wu Lung, the Hollow Ones and the Void Engineers. Members of these groups each study nefarious spirits for their own reasons. Choristers, Dreamspeakers and Void Engineers frequently undertake demonology with a "know-thine-enemy" mindset. Each group views the Infernal as one of its primary adversaries. Priests and shamans share a duty to protect their followers from malevolent spirits, while the Void Engineers consider the protection of the human race from hostile forces beyond the Gauntlet to be one of their primary missions. Their magic (or Science) in relation to demons focuses on ways to guard against, capture and banish such beings.

Hermetics, Wu Lung and Hollowers often study demons simply for sake of knowledge. Hermetics and Hollowers tend to view such beings as having the potential to be either threats or pawns — and the more a mage knows about a foe, the easier he can turn it into a pawn. Wu Lung consider a demon to merely be one of the Ten Thousand Things, governed by its place in the universe and ultimately subservient to the will of the Celestial Emperor. As such, a Dragon Wizard is perfectly within his rights to demand service from such beings. The demonological magic of these mages focuses on the summoning and binding of demons, forcing them to serve the Demonologist as spies, messengers and bodyguards among other roles.

Reaction to Demonology is mixed. Some mages view the entire practice as inherently corrupt and believe it can only serve as a gateway to damnation, while the other extreme finds nothing wrong with it. In the middle are those who differentiate between the study of demons and the summoning and control of such creatures, but even then there are arguments over level of legality. While the practice of Demonology has never been officially condemned by the Council of Nine or the Technocracy Inner Circle, it is still frowned upon by most mages. Those who publicly proclaim their use of such magics may find themselves shunned or snubbed by willworkers who do not share their interests.

The next category is known as *Infernal Barter*. This "lesser" form of Infernalism does not involve the character's soul. Instead, the Infernalist and demon trade favors, information or other items of equivalent value. The items involved in these bargains are diverse. They may be as mundane as a monetary bribe paid to the character in exchange for looking the other way as a demon goes about its business, or as exotic as a major Wonder traded for the purchase of a long-lost tome of mystical lore. Although such trades are considered illegal, they are far more common than most mages would care to admit.

At the height of the Ascension War, many mages were perfectly glad to trade important and confidential information about their Traditions and their chantries in exchange for equipment and information to use against the Technocracy. Even in the wake of the Reckoning, such practices continue as mages seek information about vampires and other supernatural monsters, ways to bypass the Avatar Storm and the countless collections of mystical lore which have been lost in the upheavals of the last several years. The punishment for Casual Infernalism is typically limited to simple Censure, but more notorious bargains may result in Branding and Ostracism. Especially conservative tribunals may sentence the offender to death.

The Practical Demonologist

Demonology requires absolute commitment; it's a demanding and exacting discipline. A mage who only dabbles will quickly find himself in over his head. For those brave — or perhaps foolhardy — souls with the dedication to master the demonological arts, the following advice will prove helpful.

• **Abilities:** Demonology, in reference to the study of demons, is a specialization of Occult. This knowledge is absolutely vital to any such character. Still, this alone does not a Demonologist make. Abilities such as Academics (anthropology), Academics (paleography), Cosmology (Infernal Realms), Enigmas, Law, Intimidation and Subterfuge are also useful. For Wu Lung Demonologists, the Etiquette skill is every bit as vital as Occult (demonology).

Technocratic "demonologists" — who will never identify themselves as such — use Extradimensional Entities as a specialization of Reality Deviant Data (the Technocracy counterpart of Occult). Science (paraphysics) and Science (xenobiology) will also prove helpful. More in-depth descriptions of these abilities may be found in **Guide to the Technocracy**.

• **Backgrounds:** Library and Sanctum (see **Guide to the Traditions**) are essentials for any serious Demonologist. Mentor may also be helpful (assuming the character is not self-taught). Allies, Contacts or Influence may be needed to keep witchhunters away.

• ***Magic:*** Demonology, in reference to the summoning and command of demons, is a specialization of the Spirit Sphere (or of the Path of Summoning, Binding & Warding if using **Sorcerer**). The ability to bind demons (Spirit ••••[4]) is a requirement for most demonological magic, although the ability to harm spirits (Spirit ••[2] in conjunction with other effects) may allow less powerful Demonologists to bully and threaten lesser demons into submission. Technocrats use Extradimensional Entities as a specialization of Dimensional Science. The ability to create barrier wards (Correspondence •••[3] in conjunction with other spheres) is another important tool. Basic Mind magic (to prevent distractions) is also a simple but useful ability. The ability to control one's dreams (Mind ••• or the Path of Oneiromancy) can be a vital, if often overlooked, tool in the Demonologist's arsenal, as demons frequently invade the dreamscapes of those mortals they seek to corrupt or harm.

Beyond Infernal Barter lies the realm of the *Soul Trade*. Here, the Infernalist will seek contact with a Demon Lord or one of its representatives, with the express purpose of negotiating for Investments and other powers in exchange for portions of the Infernalist's soul. Those who engage in Soul Trade, be they Awakened, sleeper or supernatural monster, are considered *barabbi* by the Council of Nine. Only the most lenient of Tribunals will sentence a convicted Soul Trader to anything less than death. If not executed, the Infernalist will most likely be Branded and Censured for the rest of her life.

The final category of Infernalism is *Subjugation*. Rather than trade off portions of his soul one piece at a time, the Infernalist offers his entire soul at once. He becomes a willing slave to his demonic master, all for a chance at power. Such Infernalists have little in the way of free will, becoming mere extensions of the Demon Lord's power into the material world. Rehabilitation is impossible, and the only suitable punishments are Gilgul and death.

The Highway to Hell

To any reasonably intelligent person, the act of selling your soul into eternal slavery — even a piece at a time — is an extremely shortsighted and irrational act. So why would anyone willingly do such a thing? For the Awakened, who are all too aware that the dark truths often dismissed as superstition and myth are very very real, the question is even more significant. When one has seen hell with her own eyes and walked among the souls of the damned, why would she ever choose to spend eternity as one of them?

Every Infernalist is, first and foremost, an individual. Each has deeply personal motivations which have lead him down the path of damnation. What chain of events led the Infernalist to strike his unholy deal? What is it that he wants so badly that he's willing to sell his soul for it? What does he plan to do with the Investments he receives from the pact? The answers to these questions not only establish the Infernalist's motivations and behavior, but also influence which path the Infernalist follows on his way to damnation — or perhaps even salvation.

Greed, Lust and Envy

Everyone wants something. It doesn't matter if it's wealth, fame, power, knowledge or an actual object. To the Infernalist, that end justifies any means necessary to obtain it. Such Infernalists seek out demons who can grant them either that which they seek, or the tools to acquire it themselves. Once

he has the thing he craves, however, he will often find himself unsatisfied and craving more.

For those consumed by greed, no amount of money or power or knowledge is enough — he will always want more. Envy drives the Infernalist to want what others possess, and once she has it, the object of desire loses much of its luster. For those driven by lust, it's not the object itself they desire but the act of actually acquiring it which he seeks. Regardless of why, the Infernalist will once again turn to the demon to fulfill his cravings. Piece by piece, the Infernalist sells more and more of his soul to his demonic master.

For every new gift, the demon demands greater and greater service. Even what starts with simple favors — looking the other way during a crime — can quickly spiral into greater and more blasphemous atrocities — such as sacrificing one's own children to the master. Like junkies, these Infernalists become perfectly willing to do anything, no matter how debased or abominable, just to get their fix.

Revenge and Wrath

Anger is a powerful motivation. The natural instinct is to lash out at what makes us angry, but sometimes the target of our anger is too strong. The Infernalist, faced with an enemy too powerful to harm, finds himself consumed by rage. The fires of hatred and vengeance burn in his heart, and the need for revenge overwhelms him.

Power is what such Infernalists crave — the power to strike down their enemies and take retribution for any slight, real or imagined. Although this power is often physical, such is not always the case. Others seek out social or political power and engage the targets of their wrath in very different arenas of combat. Many of these Infernalists rapidly burn out, destroying themselves along with their chosen enemy. Others can spend decades or even centuries carrying out cold and methodical plots, bringing ruin or death to countless victims. Wrathful Infernalists can make the most deadly of enemies, as anyone who dares stand in the way of their revenge can easily find themselves counted as a new target. Few of these types desire redemption. The exception is typically one who has fulfilled his quest for revenge, and found that it has not brought him the sense of satisfaction he had hoped for.

Perversity and Decadence

It's fun to be bad. Why waste the best years of your life in virtue and chastity? Drugs are fun. Sex is fun. Breaking the rules is fun. Of course, once you do such things on a regular basis, the thrill starts to wear off. You need to try something even riskier. Harder drugs. Kinkier sex. More outrageous crimes. Infernalism is just one more thrill ride. The danger of summoning demons. The excitement of being blasphemous. The stimulation of engaging in darker and more unspeakable perversions. Such Infernalists have few (if any) limits to how far they will go. Drug orgies, child rape, cannibalism, and human sacrifices only scratch the surface of the horrors such people will commit.

In addition to being some of the most loathsome of Infernalists, the perverse and decadent are frequently some of the most dangerous. This is not the result of raw power, but simply because such Infernalists will often gather into cults and other conspiratorial gatherings for the purpose of mutual perversion. With strength in numbers, they are able to pool their resources and influence to shield each other from outsiders. Those who square off against such cults often become paranoid, as they are never quite sure just who is or isn't working for the enemy.

Desperation and Despair

There are times when a person ends up in a no-win situation and the only way out is a deal with the devil. In the World of Darkness, that's not just a figure of speech. If given the choice between death and damnation, many will choose damnation. But it is not always death Infernalists are desperate to escape. When faced with total financial or social ruin, what does one's soul matter compared to everything you've worked a lifetime to earn? Eternal damnation may be a small price to pay to save your children from death by disease or starvation. When modern medicine offers no hope for your incurable illness, who's to say that hell can't succeed where science has failed.

Many mages, after becoming aware of just how many dark forces are arrayed against mankind, wonder how humanity can ever hope to survive. Consumed by despair, they simply give up and decide to join what they see as the winning side. Those who fall out of desperation are often the most reluctant of Infernalists, and many actively seek a way to get out of having to lie in the bed they've made for themselves. When looking for redemption (or at the very least, a loophole), such desperate souls often go looking for specialists in the areas of demons and the supernatural.

Sloth and Laziness

Those who sell their souls out of sloth are perhaps some of the most pathetic Infernalists in

existence. Some demons won't even deal with such souls, considering it beneath them (Fiends will often deal with these types, simply to build a stable of loyal — if not always useful — followers as quickly as possible). These Infernalists make pacts for the simple reason that it's easier than working for what they want. Why waste your time with sweat and toil when you can get ahead by cheating? Easy money or easy magic, it's all the same. Such Infernalists are typically among the weakest known (they are often content with only the most basic of Investments). Others find themselves in over their heads and are forced to do more than they bargained for after making pacts with devils who are not content for their servants to simply rest on their laurels. Surprisingly, a few among these slothful actually thrive under such conditions and grow into extremely productive and resourceful agents.

Birthright

Sometimes Infernalism becomes a family affair. Passed down from generation to generation, those born into such families are raised in sin and blasphemy. They consider such behavior, no matter how inhuman, to be perfectly natural. Their souls are consecrated to the family's dark patron at birth and the very idea of turning against their master or their family is completely alien. Although such families are rare, their lineage can stretch back for centuries or even millennia. Many are small and often inbred families who live in isolation from the rest of the world, typically in rural backwoods areas or in rundown, dilapidated estates. A few wealthy and extended clans spread across the globe. Such families frequently use carefully arranged marriages among second and third cousins as ways to keep their bloodlines pure.

Serpents in the Faithly Tree

During the world's Age of Legends, and in some cases into the Mythic Ages, demons and dark gods were known to mate with humans — not all of them willing — and sire beings who possessed powers and abilities beyond that of mortal men. While many of these demon-spawn and demigods died tragic deaths, some created offspring of their own. These children and their descendants carry the taint of darkness within their blood, and continue to pass it down through the generations.

Members of these tainted bloodlines are not automatically damned. Many are completely unaware of their unusual pedigree, even if they find themselves drawn into the twilight world of magic and the occult. However, such people frequently draw the attention of Nephandi or Infernalist cults (who wish to recruit them), or their supernatural ancestor (who may wish to cultivate the descendent as a mortal agent or perhaps simply serve as a rather twisted guardian angel — if not both).

These bloodlines do not involve any special game mechanics (there is no "Blood of Demons" merit or anything). Instead, this is meant to serve as a plot device. At the Storyteller's discretion, players who wish for their characters to have such "colorful" family trees may use this as justification for purchasing such Merits or Flaws as Berserker, Nightmares, Conditional Magic, Parlor Trick, Medium, Oracular Ability, Natural Channel, Stormwarden, Fae Blood, Legendary Attribute, Sphere Natural/Inept, The Bard's Tongue, Echoes, Geasa, Crucial Component, Dark Fate, Primal Marks (from **Mage: the Ascension**), Celestial Affinity, Nephilim, Faust's Burden (**Blood Treachery**), Strength of Psyche, Wild Talent, Blood Magic, Path Natural/Inept, Totem, Unsettling Effect (**Sorcerer**), Stress Atavism, Demented Eidolon (**Guide to the Technocracy**), Pushy Avatar, Nephandic Taint (**Initiates of the Art**) or others. Also at the Storyteller's discretion, such characters may possess one or more Infernal Investments without having undergone a pact (just remember that the Signs and Side Effects still apply, and the character will more than likely fall under suspicion of engaging in Soul Trade).

We Are Legion

The question of which demon an Infernalist character or cult deals with is a vital one. The motivations which lead a character to walk the Infernal path have a direct impact on the demon he choses to seek out. Likewise, the demon's nature will affect what it is willing to offer the Infernalist and what it will ask of the character in return.

The number of demons, dark gods and other malevolent entities present in the World of Darkness is uncountable. This entire chapter could devote itself entirely to detailing potential Infernal masters and still only scratch the surface. The Christian Devil in all its myriad forms may be the most famous Infernal master, but it is by no means the only one.

The following are only a few of the more powerful, *more well known or simply more interesting* Demon Lords from around the world. Additional Demon Lords who are specific to East Asia may be found in **Dragons of the East**, as well as **The 1000 Hells** for **Kindred of the East**. Storytellers are encouraged to research mythology, fiction and other sources to find additional ideas as well as inspiration for their own demons.

Ares

An ancient Grecian war god, Ares is an embodiment of violence, bloodlust and sadism. His worship was more often an act of appeasement simply to ward off the deity's wrath than any form of devotion.

Those who bargain with Ares typically do so for one of *two reasons:* the desire for martial strength and power or a burning need for revenge. There are the occasional rumors or "friend of a friend" stories, however, which speak of entire families or clans raised in the Spartan style and taught to venerate the bloody lord of battle. A recent variation involves American militia groups or small Third World mercenary companies who are fronts for Ares cults. *Ares's boons* are almost always militant in nature. Increased physical attributes, battle skills, combat oriented Investments and unholy weapons are typical gifts. Those who deal with Ares must be wary, for he is a mercurial being given to destructive outbursts and may decide to simply destroy any mortal who dares draw his attention.

The Emerald Queen

One of a growing number of "secular demons," the first known mention of the Emerald Queen occurs in The Journeys of William Cross, the privately published journal of a 19th century Ecstatic shaman and umbral explorer. Many dismissed Cross's account of his meet-

ings with the malevolent entity as drug-induced fiction, until her existence was also reported independently by Hermetic and Batini demonologists.

The Emerald Queen is believed to be an Astral manifestation of the concepts of desire, envy and greed which has evolved into a Demon Lord. Her servitors whisper in the ears of covetous mortals, encouraging them to take what they want by any means necessary. Her favors frequently come in the form of heightened social attributes and skills, as well as backgrounds and suitable magical knowledge (the Paths of Fascination and Fortune are common). In fitting with her nature, the Queen is a selfish being and will rarely tolerate her disciples seeking to make deals with other demons. Those who do frequently find themselves stripped of all the Queen has offered and occasionally their very lives.

Gawama

The Bushmen of southern Africa know Gawama as the lord of the dead and enemy of all that which lives. He passionately hates the living world and wishes to bring all creation under his miserable rule. From his home in the Underworld, Gawama sends his ghostly servants to harass the living and even kidnap mortals. His worshipers are often those consumed with hatred or lust for power. They frequently become powerful necromancers, commanding undead servants and evil spirits. With the number of walking dead now loose upon the earth, Gawama's power and influence can only continue to grow.

Ishtar

The Whore of Babylon and the Lady of Battles, Ishtar is the goddess of lust and of violent agony in war. Those who serve her are drawn for many reasons. Some are seduced with the promises of physical pleasure. Others crave the warrior goddess' blessing as they strike against their enemies or hope to gain access to worldly wealth or influence. I

In ancient Babylon, Ishtar was the patron of prostitutes. Many of her modern followers (male and female) have become mistresses and catamites to the rich and powerful. According to legend, men who dared to love the goddess died agonizing deaths. Some worshipers live up to the myth, living as virtual black widows who offer their lovers to Ishtar as bloody sacrifices. Social attributes and abilities are frequent boons to her servants, as are the tools for achieving money and power. Some are also granted legendary physical power, making them dangerous foes in any arena.

The Dark Man at the Crossroads

He answers to many names: Legba, Eshu, The Black Man, Scratch. If the world lasts long enough, he will someday answer to countless others. If you want to learn something badly enough, go down to the crossroads and wait. Eventually the Dark Man will find you and offer to teach you that which you desire.

The Dark Man is a trickster spirit, given to fluctuating moods of good-natured generosity and of ironic cruelty. At times he will offer that which the seeker asks for free, but often he demands favors or even sacrifice. Rarely will the Dark Man offer Investments. His forte is knowledge and skill, and he can teach the secrets of the Spheres as easily as he can teach how to play the guitar.

Whether or not the Dark Man is really a demon or simply a one of the countless spirits who, for good or ill, bring knowledge to mankind is a hotly debated topic among the Awakened. Several mages trained in the art of Hoodoo folk magic, including members of the Dreamspeakers, Ecstatics, Euthanatoi and Verbena, claim one of the Dark Man's manifestations as their Avatar (or even as their totem spirit in the case of shamanic mages). So many people have had so many different experiences with the Dark Man that some question if all of these spirits are even the same entity. Perhaps more than one being wears the mask of the Dark Man.

Loviatar

The Maiden of Pain, Loviatar thrives on misery, torture and vengeance. While physical torment is rightfully associated with her followers, mental and emotional cruelty also serve as acts of devotion. Worshipers often seek out the Maiden for reasons of sadistic perversion or to bring vengeance against their enemies. Those who earn the goddess's favor are frequently gifted with inhumanly high pain tolerances (body armor, biocontrol) or healing abilities (regeneration), as well as the power to inflict pain on others (Paths of Hellfire and Fortune; Psychic Vampirism).

Loviatar's cults can vary wildly. One cult in Helsinki may have members who wrap themselves in barbed wire before engaging in sadomasochistic orgies while a cult in San Francisco specializes in engineering the destruction of personal relationships, in the hopes of luring vengeful ex-lovers into Loviatar's arms.

The Prince of Nightmares

The enigmatic being known as the Prince of Nightmares is first mentioned in an ancient Sanskrit tablet believed to predate the Himalayan Wars. Its only other confirmed recordings are in the journal of a medieval Byzantine alchemist, and a 19th century aboriginal rock painting in Australia. For centuries, Awakened scholars have considered the Prince little more than a myth or fairy tale. In the past few years, however, popular opinion has changed radically.

Hell's Hierarchy

The spiritual servants of Hell are legion. Demonologists can spend lifetimes researching demons without cataloging them all. In general, demonologists divide demons into three broad categories. These classifications are not absolute, and the distinctions between them sometimes blur. An extremely powerful Fiend may be mistaken for a lesser Demon Lord, or vice versa. Even within each category there exists a complex labyrinth of subrankings and pecking orders.

Demons, regardless of type, are governed by the rules for Spirits presented in chapter three of the **Mage Storytellers Companion**. The more violent or physically oriented a demon is, the higher its Rage rating; the more subtle or devious, the higher its Gnosis.

• **Imps:** Lesser demons, Imps are the spirits most often encountered by mages, whether in the material world or in the Umbra. Demonologists frequently summon these beings, pressing them into service as familiars, binding them into fetishes or simply using them as spies and messengers. Imps are responsible for many of the activities frequently attributed to demons: possession, whispering temptations into the minds of the unwary, draining the life of sleeping mortals, the destruction of crops and livestock, kidnapping children and other foul acts. Imps are the demons used in the creation of the devil-eaten (see sidebar), with the power of the Imp impacting the strength of the final monster.

• **Fiends:** Sometimes described as Hell's Middle Management, Fiends are those demons too powerful to manifest directly on earth, but not as powerful as the Demon Lords. Only the most powerful — or at least the most arrogant — of demonologists dare try to summon Fiends. These creatures often serve as lieutenants for a Demon Lord, although many remain independent. Some are even ambitious enough that they work towards one day becoming a Demon Lord. Fiends have the power to grant Investments, but will often grant only lower level gifts out of a desire to conserve their own power (unless acting on behalf of a Lord). Fiends almost always have a number of Imps in their service, either sworn to the Fiend itself or to the Fiend's master.

In addition to Spirit charms, Fiends also possess Infernal Investments, including Sorcery Paths and/or Sphere Magic. Because Fiends are unable to manifest directly on earth, their use of the Materialize Charm only focuses a small portion of the demon's power into a material form (often refered to as a proxy). This agent is a quasi-independent extension of the Fiend's consciousness, which remains aware of everything its creation experiences. The strength of this agent depends on how much Power the Fiend invests in it. Infernal Investments may be manifested at the same Power cost as their listed price in Soul Points.

• **Demon Lords:** The Masters of the Damned, the Lords of Hell are as much fable as they are fact. Their true numbers, names, or ultimate goals can only be speculated upon by demonologists. Demon Lords are the beings to whom Infernalists sell their souls, be it piecemeal or all at once, and are the source of their followers' Infernal powers. Such beings are never encountered directly — no human mind could view them and remain sane — but instead act through Demonic avatars (the term refers to the tradional concept of a surrogate incarnation of a power too great for direct manifestation in physical reality rather than to a mage's oversoul). These avatars take forms which are more easily processed by the human mind, sometimes appearing as the witness would expect the demon to look, but more often as a twisted parallel to the viewers' expectations. Demonic avatars possess godlike levels of power, including Investments and Spheres (often at Mastery level if not higher). Like Fiends, avatars are too powerful to materialize directly on earth and must create proxies.

Note: While a Demon Lord's Mask is governed by the same spirit rules as other demons, the Lord itself is too powerful to be represented by mere statistics.

Many believe that the demon known as the Prince of Nightmares has long been dormant, locked away in the Deep Umbra until recent events reawakened it. Several demonologists claim that the wide spread instances of mass hysteria, hallucinations and reported visions during the summer of 1999 were the sign of this Demon Lord's return. A small flood of demons in the being's service have apparently entered the material world, some even devouring the minds of sleeping mortals and taking over their bodies.

No one really seeks out the Prince of Nightmares. Instead, its servitors seek out those the Prince wants and weaves corruptive whispers into the target's dreams. Power and favors are offered in exchange for service, and the subject gradually becomes a willing devotee to his new master. These Infernalists often become powerful masters of dream magic (the Path of Oneiromancy or the Mind Sphere). Others become like the Prince's demonic servants, stealing and eating the dreams of mortals (Psychic Vampirism) in order to empower other psychic abilities and Investments.

Rex Mundi

It has been known by many names over the centuries — Marduk, Demiurge, Jaldabaoth, Mammon, Industry, Empire — but its title has always been the same: Rex Mundi, The World King. It is the very concept of materialism and worldly power made manifest. Rex Mundi does not even have to seek out new worshipers; they come to him in droves, willing to do anything in the quest for money, power and fame. Those who worship Rex Mundi are some of the most resourceful and dangerous of Infernalists. As heads of corporations, wealthy celebrities and powerful politicians, they hold frightening levels of societal influence and are ruthless when using that influence to crush anything — or anyone — that gets in their way. The World King's boons are almost always material in nature. Even such things as attribute enhancements will come in the form of cybernetic implants and chemical treatments (rivaling much of the Technocracy's work in quality).

Tezcatlipoca

The Smoking Mirror, Tezcatlipoca, was once first among the Aztec gods. Even today, he is still worshiped by North American Infernalists. The Shadow's gifts are many, and are more than enough to lure those ruthless enough to learn under his banner.

As the patron of magicians and witches, Tezcatlipoca offers the lost secrets of bloody Aztec magic. In his guise of Huitzilopochtli, the bloodthirsty god of war, he offers physical might and mystical weapons (Infernal Wonders; the obsidian-bladed macauitl sword is a classic, but some come in the form of modern knives or even firearms). As Xipetotec, the flayed god of fertility, he grants long life and good fortune. Sorcerers who follow Tezcatlipoca are often masters of shapeshifting (the form of the jaguar is a favorite), weather magic, divination (through the use of mirrors), and control of the very darkness itself.

The god's sacrifices are among the most bloody known. Offerings to the Smoking Mirror in each of his forms — children are a favored offering of Huitzilopochtli — are frequently skinned alive, and at times the skin will even be worn by the Infernalist priest. Those who are lucky enough to avoid this fate simply have their still-beating hearts carved from their chests. Many of Tezcatlipoca's worshipers also keep alive the Aztec custom of cannibalism.

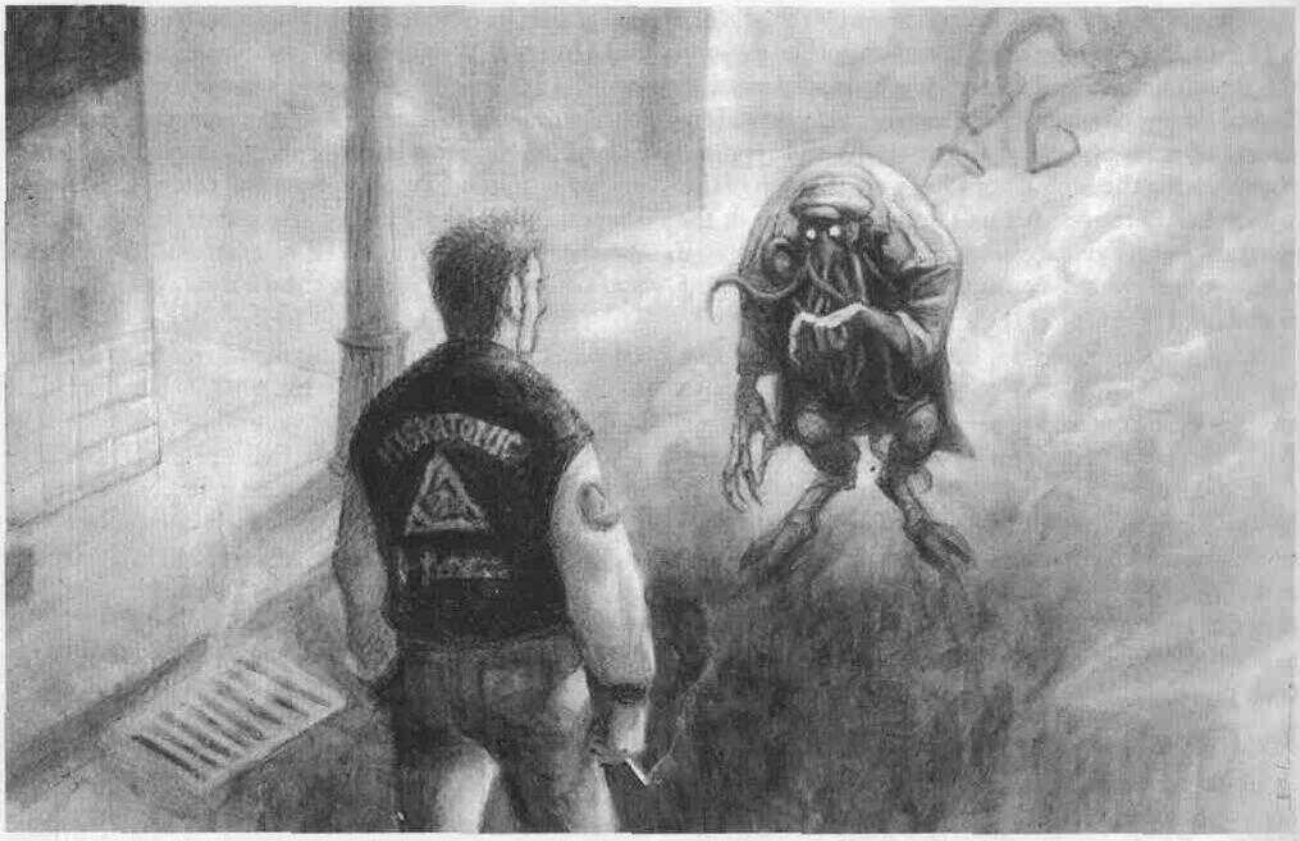
The Soul Trade

At the heart of Infernalism lies the practice of Soul Trade. Bartering pieces of one's soul for diabolic favor is a harrowing undertaking, and many would-be Infernalists break under the immense pressure. The Infernalist must first make contact with the Demon Lord, then enter into negotiations over how much of his soul the Infernalist gives up in exchange for what power. This is not as easy as it sounds.

The first hurdle is securing a contact method. No matter how immoral and ruthless an Infernalist is, he's of little use until a Demon Lord puts a leash on him. There are countless rituals for summoning demons. However, there's no guarantee that the ritual in question will summon the demon that the Infernalist wants. Finding a reliable contact method requires some effort, but there are four basic pathways to such forbidden knowledge.

If the would-be Infernalist is unfortunate enough to have already attracted the attentions of a Fiend or Demon Lord, then the demon or one of it's agents may visit the character in his nightly dreams. If so, then the demon may also agree to teach the proper ritual required to summon it. Of course, the demon will likely require some small service in exchange for this information, allowing the Infernalist to gain valuable experience for his future life as a slave.

The next option for the would-be Infernalist is to find another Infernalist mage to instruct him in the ways of summoning and bargaining. However, complications can quickly arise. For one, most Infernalists don't want to be found and tend to react poorly if some



stranger shows up on their doorstep asking about things that shouldn't be spoken of. On top of this, there's no guarantee that the Infernalist will even have the knowledge the character seeks (especially if he serves a completely different Demon Lord than the one the character wishes to contact). Even if he does, the Infernalist may be more interested in corrupting the novice into serving him instead of the Demon Lord. Also, the elder Infernalist may have already attracted the attention of witchhunters, possibly putting an end to the would-be Infernalist's career before it even starts. One possible way around this complication is to seek out a Demonologist rather than an Infernalist, but a naive Demonologist is not long for this world. Most are innately suspicious of anyone who shows an interest in their work. Some even maintain contacts among witchhunter sects and such a Demonologist will not hesitate to summon inquisitors if she suspects a fallen mage of trying to play her for a fool.

If an Infernalist mage cannot be found, then one must look elsewhere. Other denizens of the World of Darkness have Infernalists among their numbers, some of whom might actually serve the same Demon Lord the character wishes to deal with. This assumes the creatures will even decide to communicate with the would-be Infernalist — vampires, werebeasts and Fair Folk are more likely to consider the mortal a tasty snack. Assuming the character survives, his new "friends" may attract unwanted attention. Blood-drinking corpses, man-eating monsters and mind-raping aliens are best left alone, and if the Infernalist is noticed by other mages, he will probably be questioned at some point. Even worse, the character may come to the attention of inhuman witchhunters. Pity the would-be Infernalist who falls into the clutches of undead inquisitors, many of whom have had centuries to perfect the art of inflicting unspeakable pain and show not the slightest hint of remorse.

Ultimately, the most reliable method of learning how to contact the Demon Lords may be rigorous independent study. Of course, reliable does not mean easy. It might take years to amass the knowledge the character needs, and may require traveling to the ends of the earth — or even beyond — for each scrap of parchment. The would-be Infernalist may even find himself battling other Infernalists or Demonologists (or the player characters) for the tools he needs.

If You're a Friend of Evil, You're a Friend of Mine?

Infernalism is not limited to humans. Some of the more monstrous denizens of the World of Darkness also call demons and dark gods their master. This does not mean, however, such creatures have any desire to ally with mortal or even Awakened Infernalists. For one thing, not all Infernalists follow the same master, and many are rivals if not outright enemies. In addition, each type of supernatural Infernalist comes with it's own personal baggage.

Vampires in general tend to view humans as little more than cattle, and Infernal vampires are no exception. At best, a mortal Infernalist might be considered a useful but ultimately disposable pawn. Werebeasts who walk the road of damnation are even more bestial and uncontrollable than their undamned counterparts. They often appear to have more in common with Nephandi than with Infernalists, and many have been mutated or driven insane by their exposure to the forces of darkness. Even more alien than werebeasts are the Fair Folk, whom many mages, Infernalist or not, believe to simply be lesser demons who have taken human form. All in all, mortal Infernalists tend to consider such potential allies far more trouble than they're worth and avoid the unnecessary complications involved whenever possible.

Once the Infernalist has found a way to contact the Demon Lord he seeks, then comes the act of bargaining. As any experienced negotiator knows, the first step in a successful negotiation is preparation. Every Demon Lord has its favored method of doing business, making it important for the would-be Infernalist to learn the ins and outs of his future master's preferences (presumably while learning how to contact the Demon Lord in the first place). The level of formality will vary from one Demon Lord to the next, but the negotiation process ultimately boils down to the Infernalist telling his new master what he wants and then haggling over just how much of his soul the demon receives in exchange for each item on the list. The goal of the Infernalist is to receive as much power as possible while keeping a portion of his soul free from demonic control. The Demon Lord, of course, seeks possession of the character's entire soul.

The Name That You Never Will Guess

So why waste all that time running around to find the right way to summon a demon? "I've got Spirit magic so I just use that." Not quite. While an Infernalist can try summoning a Demon Lord with Spirit •• (or with the Path of Summoning, Binding & Warding if using **Sorcerer**), he will have no actual ability to compel the Demon Lord to deal with him. For one, Demon Lords are godlike in terms of power. Even Archmages tread carefully when it comes to such beings. A being of that power will only answer such a generic summons if it feels like it, and if the would-be Infernalist can't be bothered to learn the right way of doing things, why should the Demon Lord be bothered to deal with him? The rituals exist for a reason. For one, they make it easier for the demon to manifest. In addition, they demonstrate the petitioner's worthiness to actually deal with the demon and a suitable degree of submission to the demon's desires. By performing the ritual, the Infernalist guarantees that the Demon Lord will at least negotiate with him.

The rituals for initiating Soul Trade work the same for any who uses them, be they Awakened, Sorcerer or mundane. The Infernalist is not required to possess any previous magical talent to truck with demons. There are no rules or experience point costs for learning the necessary ritual; an Infernalist either knows it or he doesn't (and is searching for it). The ritual varies from one Demon Lord to another. It may be a simple as being on the right street corner at midnight or as complex as several days spent in meditative chanting followed by a human sacrifice (and extended Intelligence + Occult rolls). The Storyteller should develop a ritual which suits her purposes for the story.

Finally, when the details of the deal have been negotiated and agreed upon by both parties, the contract will be confirmed through a ritual. This may be a simple as a handshake or literally signing a contract, but more often the Infernalist will have to perform a task or other act of devotion to the Demon Lord. The malevolence of this task depends on how much of the Infernalist's soul was traded to his new master. Lesser deals may be sealed with mere theft or property destruction; greater pacts may require the corruption of major institutions or mass murder.

The Devil is in the Details

The mechanical details of Soul Trade are fairly simple. Each mortal has a number of Soul Points equal to her (Willpower + Arete) x10. This total represents the degree to which the Infernalist can trade away portions of her soul and still retain self-mastery. During Soul Trade, these points are used to purchase Infernal Investments from the Demon Lord. The more points spent, the more the character's soul belongs to her demonic master. Once the points are gone, so is any trace of the Infernalist's free will.

When negotiating a pact, the Infernalist will have a list of what she wants. These items translate into Investments (listed later in this chapter). Each item must be negotiated separately, and how well the Infernalist negotiates determines the deal she gets. If the Storyteller actually acts out a Soul Trade, then the Storyteller secretly rolls the Infernalist's Intelligence + Law (difficulty 8) for each item (this may vary depending on the preferred style of negotiation for the Demon Lord involved; Wits + Enigmas, Manipulation + Subterfuge or even — as a long shot — Charisma + Intimidation are other possibilities). The greater the number of successes, the better bargain the Infernalists gets, as shown on the table below.

No. of Successes	Result
• **Botch:**	Roll one die, triple the result and add that number to the point cost of the item.
• **Failure:**	Roll one die and add the result to the point cost of the item.
• **1 Success:**	Character pays the listed point cost.
• **2 Successes:**	Reduce the point cost by 2.
• **3 Successes:**	Character pays half the listed point cost (round up).
• **4 Successes:**	Character pays a third the listed point cost (round up).
• **5 Successes:**	The item is free.

The character will never know her exact Soul Point total; only the Storyteller knows. This makes it exceedingly easy for an Infernalist to go back to the well once too often, finding herself a mindless slave before she even realizes it. Once the Infernalist exhausts her Soul Points, she becomes a slave. She is nothing more that chattel for her master, and the Demon Lord may do whatever it pleases with the Infernalist's mind, body or soul. Some demons slay their slaves outright, devouring their souls and destroying their bodies. Others force their property to serve as earthbound agents. The slave may never disobey a direct order from her master, no matter how suicidal that order is.

A naive Infernalist may believe she can trick two or more Demon Lords into fighting over her soul, thus forestalling the inevitable slavery. Unfortunately, the odds are firmly against such a plan succeeding. In contrast to the character, the Demon Lord will know exactly what state the Infernalist's soul is in and is unlikely to desire "used goods." It also presumes that Demon Lords actually hold the fate of a single soul in such importance. The most likely outcome is that the Demon Lords in question will simply kill the Infernalist and then tear her soul to shreds, each taking what is theirs.

Nothing's Free

Mages appear to get a much better deal out of Soul Trading than the average mortal, but those extra Soul Points come with a price attached. An Awakened mage is not only bartering away his soul, but also his Avatar. With each and every pact, the Demon Lord is able to sink its hooks into the Infernalist's Avatar, slowly corrupting and enslaving it. A mage can make a number of Soul Pacts up to his Avatar rating before his Avatar is completely enslaved to the Demon Lord.

This Avatar enslavement has no impact on the number of Soul Points the Infernalist has left, nor does it impact the ownership of his soul. What it does impact is the mage's ability to use magic. Once the Avatar is enslaved, the mage's Arete is frozen and cannot be increased. He can no longer gain Quintessence from Nodes either, save those which are consecrated to the Demon Lord. The mage is also incapable of learning any new Spheres, save those learned from the Demon Lord through future Soul Pacts (thus forcing the Infernalist to keep trading away more and more of his soul if he wishes to increase his magical power). The Avatar — which is now a mouth piece for the Demon Lord — begins pushing for the mage to make further Soul Pacts, as well as conditioning the

mage to rely more and more on his Hell-powered Investments instead of his own magic.

Even if the mage is able to resist his enslaved Avatar's demands for further Soul Pacts, there is further danger. After (Avatar rating + Arete) years, the Demon Lord begins to separate the Avatar from the mage — metaphysically shearing it away from the Infernalist's soul. Each year after the process begins, the mage loses one point from his Avatar rating. When his Avatar is reduced to zero, he loses one point from his Arete per year. When the Infernalist's Arete rating is at zero, his Avatar is gone (now the property of the Demon Lord) and he may no longer use any of his magic. All the character has left are his Infernal Investments (including any magic that was learned through Soul Pacts).

If these guidelines seem harsh, consider this: At its heart, Mage is a game in which characters seek to change the world through the power of *their* beliefs — of *their* faith, *their* genius, *their* Will. An Infernalist is a slave, and an Infernalist mage has thrown away any destiny he might have had to be nothing more than a puppet to an inhuman master. The very concept of Infernalism — *spiritual slavery in exchange for material* power — stands as a complete anathema to the very idea behind Mage.

The Chains that Bind Men's Souls

Not every Infernalist sells his soul piecemeal. There are those who offer themselves up to their master in one fell stroke. The reason for this act is simple enough: the Infernalist wishes to become one of the Demon Lord's most favored servants, hopefully to sit at the master's right hand when it one day rules the earth. As with Soul Trade, the ritual of subjugation must be learned. Once the Infernalist has performed the ritual, he must show proper obedience to his new master through some form of ritual. This act of submission varies with each Demon Lord, but almost all involve pain, humiliation and self-sacrifice. Castration, self-flaying or the ritual sacrifice of one's family or followers are only some of the more common displays of devotion.

Once the Infernalist properly submits, his soul — and if Awakened, his Avatar with it — is stripped away by the Demon Lord to be locked away wherever the master sees fit. One who undergoes subjugation becomes one of the Demon Lord's favored agents, and as such gains numerous benefits. The Infernalist is granted with as many points worth of Investments — including Infernal Magic — as the master feels he needs. He is immune to all forms of Mind control and is effectively immortal (if killed, his consciousness returns to the master's realm where it is reformed and given a new body). In exchange, the Infernalist becomes a soulless husk with no free will of his own save that which the master allows him the illusion of possessing. The Infernalist will not and cannot disobey any order, command or request from his master. He will not even hesitate, ever. No matter how much power the Infernalist possesses, he is forevermore a mere plaything for his master.

Thirty Pieces of Silver: Infernal Investments

Investments are boons and favors which demons may grant their servants in exchange for a portion of the character's soul. These gifts range from the simple and mundane to the esoteric and powerful, but none of them risk invoking the forces of Paradox. As the name implies, these boons represent an investment by the demon in its new resource, the Infernalist. The character is now a potential agent of the demon master, and his actions are, unwittingly or not, expected to advance the master's overall agenda.

Some Investments may be detected by those who are observant enough and who know what to look for. Unless the Infernalist possesses the Mask of Innocence Investment, an astute witchhunter can determine most of an Infernalist's Investments through careful observation. *Those Infernalist who plan to remain as members* of their Tradition or Convention frequently put Mask of Innocence high on the list of boons to seek. The alternative is possible exile and death.

In addition, the sudden influx of diabolical power which grants the Investment often results in negative side effects, as the human body is not really designed to be a storehouse of Infernal power. Often the side effects are temporary (or even nonexistent in a few cases), but others occur each time the dark power is invoked or are even permanent. These side effects are cumulative, and a character who receives multiple investments at a single time may be left helpless and vulnerable as his body adjusts to its new, damned state.

Storytellers should feel free to create new Investments using the ones below as a guideline. Also, additional Investments may be found in chapter three of **Dragons of the East**.

• **Abilities** (2 points per 3 dots)

Demons whisper into the Infernalist's brain, filling her mind with knowledge and skills she never before possessed. For every two points spent, the character has 3 dots to spend on any ability or group of abilities she wishes. Usually, the abilities purchased during a single pact are related: Science & Medicine; Performance & Expression; Firearms & Crafts (gunsmithing).

Signs: Mind magic and psychic powers may notice unnatural mental patterns occurring within the Infernalist's mind when she uses abilities not her own.

Side Effects: The character's mind is addled from the sudden addition of knowledge. Subtract one from her Social attribute dice pools for a number of weeks equal to the largest number of points added to a single ability.

• **Attributes** (1 point per dot; 3 points per dot above 5)

The Devil has used a portion of his dark power to augment his servant's body. For every point spent, the Infernalist may add one dot to any Attribute of her choice. The character may even purchase legendary level attributes at the cost of 3 points per dot (with a maximum rating of 8). While Physical Attributes are the most obvious choice, they are not the only ones. A ruthless debutante might sell her soul to enhance her Appearance, while a struggling scientist might seek to boost his Intelligence. Even Physical Attributes have uses outside of raw combat; Increased Dexterity holds appeal to thieves, musicians and artists as well as warriors.

Signs: Radical changes in Attributes will be instantly noticed by those who have known the character. In addition, attributes — especially Appearance — which are blatantly superhuman (six and higher) will draw attention. The nature of certain Investments may also leave physical signs (such as unnatural organs or cybernetic implants) which become apparent upon examination.

Side Effects: The character is disoriented by the sudden change in her capabilities. For a number of weeks equal to the largest number of dots added to a single Attribute, she is at +1 difficulty to all rolls involving the Attributes so increased. At the Storyteller's discretion, Attribute levels above that of normal humans may come with additional and longer lasting side effects: Inhuman Intelligence may hamper Social rolls; Unnatural beauty may attract unwanted sycophants and other annoying pests.

• **Backgrounds** (1 point per 3 dots; 1 point per dot above 5)

Backgrounds are the most common gifts given out by demons, and they are also the most subtle and often underrated. High levels of Allies, Contacts, Influence and Resources can solve all manner of problems. Fame and Retainers are also common requests. Library and Wonders come in the form of blasphemous tomes and accursed objects (see the Mage Storytellers Companion for rules on Bloodthirsty Wonders). Familiars are lesser demons bound into material form. Mentor and Patron are always the demonic master itself (the higher the level, the greater amount of interest it takes in the Infernalist). Demons can bestow the Dream background, but it should more accurately be called Nightmares, as the insight the character receives comes from delving into the darkest and most corrupt depths of universal subconscious. Nodes are typically those places with dark and horrific histories, and often carry foul and corrupt Entropic Resonance. Rank is usually among an Infernal cult, but may also stem from other organizations. Backup and Spies tend to be members and pawns of those cults which worship the demon in question. For those Infernalists who become favored servants and agents, Arcane, Alternate Identity and Enhancements are also possible. Alternate Identity, Fame, Rank and Retainers are detailed in **The Bitter Road**; Backup, Enhancements, Patron and Spies, as well as guidelines for Backgrounds above level five, may be found in **Guide to the Technocracy**.

The Avatar background may not be purchased in this way. See the Infernal Magic investment instead.

Signs: Frequently none, unless one notices a sudden influx of money, unusual new pets or strange additions to the character's occult library.

Side Effects: Frequently none, although those granted the Dream/Nightmares Background may develop the Nightmares flaw.

• **Berserker** (4 points)

The Infernalist is filled with supernatural wrath and may spend a Willpower point to send herself into a crazed battle frenzy. During this rampage, the character gains 3 additional actions per turn, may not be dazed or stunned, and may ignore wound penalties until she is Crippled.

Sign: The Infernalist gives off a noticeable aura of wrath, anger and hatred which is obvious to those with Mind magic (and other supernatural means of aura detection) and high levels of Awareness.

Side Effects: Other people can sense her unnatural wrath on a subconscious level, making them uncomfortable and nervous. Add +1 to the difficulty of all Social rolls which do not involve intimidation. In addition, the character is a walking time bomb and may unwillingly go berserk if provoked. If embarrassed, humiliated or challenged, the Infernalist must make a Willpower roll (difficulty 6) to avoid going into an uncontrollable frenzy.

• **Body Armor** (1 points per die)

The energies of Hell augment the Infernalist's body, making her more resilient to injury that the average mortal. For every point spent on this Investment, she may add one die to all soak rolls, including the soaking of lethal damage (difficulty 6). In addition, the Infernalist may use her armor soak dice to soak aggravated damage (difficulty 8).

Signs: When the character starts shrugging off bullet wounds, it becomes obvious that something unnatural is afoot. Other signs are dependent upon the nature of the armor. A body reformatted to operate at above-human levels may show a distinct lack of "imperfections" (body hair, freckles, scars); subdermal cybernetic polymer plating will show up during medical exams; extremely dense skin and muscle tissue will result in unusual body mass.

Side Effects: The sudden changes to the Infernalist's body result in pain and discomfort. The character is at -1 to all dice pools (except for reflexive actions, like soaking) for forty-eight hours plus twelve hours per level of armor.

• **Countermagic** (1 points per die)

The energies of Hell makes the Infernalist highly resistant to magical attacks. For each point spent, the character gains one die of Countermagic.

Sign: None.

Side Effects: None. However, the Countermagic is useless against other Infernal magics.

• **Dark Shaman** (6 points)

The powers of darkness have opened the Infernalist's eyes to the spirit world, granting him dominion over its denizens. The Infernalist can automatically see spirits, including demons and wraiths (Perception + Awareness, difficulty 4), and may summon, banish and command lesser demons and other dark spirits (rolls Charisma + Intimidation, difficulty of 6 or less depending on the spirit in question). In addition, the shaman may attempt to raise or lower the local gauntlet (up to two points; never bellow 2 or above 10) and create Infernal fetishes.

Altering the Gauntlet rating requires an Infernal ritual lasting one hour per point the Gauntlet is raised or lowered, an extended Wits + Occult roll (difficulty equals the local Gauntlet rating, with each success altering the rating for 24 hours) and the expenditure of a Willpower point. Creation of Infernal fetishes first requires the Infernalist to design and construction of the physical fetish (see page 229 of **Mage: the Ascension** for rules on building devices and creating craftworks).A demon must then be bound into the creation (spend one Willpower point and roll Wits + Occult, difficulty 7).

Signs: The Infernalist is frequently attended by an entourage of lesser devils, demons and other malevolent spirits. His mere presence is likely to stir up the local spirit population.

Side Effects: Normal people consider the character odd (if not outright insane) and are uncomfortable in his presence. Add + 1 to the difficulty of all Social rolls when dealing with humans.

• **Devil Body** (10 points, plus 3 per additional characteristic)

The Infernalist's damnation has been given physical form, and he may unleash it for all of the world to see. Assuming Devil Body form requires 3 Willpower points over 3 turns. When in this form, the character's Charisma and Appearance drop to zero. However, his Physical Attributes each increase by one (even if this takes them above five). In addition, the Infernalist selects one characteristic from the sidebar below. For each additional 3 points spent, the character may select an additional characteristic for his Devil Body form. Each Devil Body form is unique and is a personal expression of both the Infernalist's psyche and the nature of his demonic master. One may be an insectoid horror, while the next is a grotesque, cybernetic killing machine.

Signs: Any attempt to view the character's aura reveals the demon which dwells beneath his skin.

Side Effects: The mental strain of transforming into a nightmarish monstrosity is more than some Infernalists can handle. A few have their minds shattered and develop multiple personalitys, separating themselves from the devil within. Others become all too comfortable with their inhuman forms, seeking to remain transformed at all times.

Devil Body Characteristics

• **Additional Limbs:** The character possesses one or more additional limbs. These may take the form of humanoid arms, tentacles, crab-like claws, a tail or anything else the Storyteller deems appropriate. This adds three extra dice to all grapple attacks.

• **Deadly Humors:** One or more of the creature's body fluids are toxic to humans and perhaps other living things as well. The effect can range from drug-like effects to deadly diseases and dangerous chemicals. One creature may have cyanide in her saliva or tears, while another sweats or bleeds acid. See the rules for disease and toxins on page 247 of **Mage: the Ascension**.

• **Demon Armor:** Add 3 to the character's soak dice pool. This functions identically to the Body Armor Investment, but the armor is blatantly obvious and inhuman (insectoid exoskeleton, dragon-like hide, cybernetic armor grafted on in place of skin).

• **Huge Size:** The character gains 3 Bruised Health Levels and grows to between 9 and 12 feet in height. Even if this is the only characteristic a character takes, he will never pass for human. He will possess thick, leathery or radically discolored skin, monstrous facial features and other distinguishing marks which mark him as inhuman.

• **Monstrous Strength:** Add 5 dots among the character's Physical Attributes (maximum of 8).

• **Natural Weaponry:** The monster possesses claws, fangs, horns or some other form of innate weaponry. Depending on the form this power takes, the creature may attack using claw and/or bite maneuvers for Strength + 2 aggravated damage. Some possess ranged attacks, in the form of destructive breath weapons, chemical-producing glands or built-in energy projectors. These ranged weapons typically do 6 dice of lethal damage or 3 dice of aggravated damage (but may do more or less at the Storyteller's discretion). This characteristic may be taken more than once to represent additional weapons or even more powerful versions of a single weapon (add two dice to the weapon's damage pool).

• **Plasmatic Form:** The creature's body is no longer solid, instead becoming a thick, viscous liquid or other non-solid form (such as living shadows). The Devil Body form is immune to kinetic (most brawl, melee and firearms) attacks, but is still vulnerable to fire, electricity and magic.

• **Wings:** The Devil Body is capable of winged flight at about 10 yards per turn or about 30 miles per hour. If this characteristic is taken twice, the speed is doubled. These wings vary in appearance. Bat, dragonfly and owl wings are common, although there are apocryphal stories of at least one high-tech monstrosity with jet engines growing out of its back.

• **The Ebon Fountain** (10 points)

The Infernalist is a living conduit to the powers of Hell. Once per night (typically at midnight), the character may add 10 points of Quintessence to his Quintessence Pool.

Signs: See below.

Side Effects: As a walking Hell-node, the character is a metaphysical beacon. He gains 3 dots of Entropic Resonance.

• **Infernal Magic** (10 points per dot).

The power of Hell grants the Infernalist influence over the very fabric of reality. Unlike normal magic, these abilities are not the result of any mystical understanding or dedicated scholarship. These "black miracles" — which may be Spheres or Sorcery Paths — are burned into the character's mind by the Demon Lord and draw their power from the energies of Hell itself. These Infernal Spheres or Paths are separate from whatever magics the Infernalist practiced prior to his pact, and require their own, separate paradigm (see sidebar). If the character purchases Spheres, he possesses an Infernal Avatar rating equal to that of his highest Infernal Sphere. This is not a true Avatar, but simply a metaphysical connection between the Infernalist and the demon which powers his magic. Rules for Sorcery Paths may be found in **Sorcerer**.

Signs: See below.

Side Effects: Having the power of Hell channeled through the character's body impacts the Tapestry around him. The Infernalist as an Entropic Resonance trait equal to the level of his highest Infernal Sphere or Path.

• **Mask of Innocence** (10 points)

The character becomes an embodiment of lies, and her Investments no longer exhibit any telltale signs. No amount of Mind, Spirit or other magic, divination, aura reading or other observation can determine if the character is an Infernalist or force her to confess her true nature. In addition, the character can no longer botch any Subterfuge rolls. Obviously, this does not help the Infernalist if she is caught, in flagrante delicto, worshiping at her dark altar and eating the tender liver of a small child whose blood she has just offered to her demonic master.

Paradigms of the Damned

When a Demon Lord consents to impart knowledge of Infernal Magic upon supplicants, it is limited by nature in the styles of magic it can teach. The following represent only the most common paradigms of Infernal magic. Storytellers are encouraged to develop others as they see fit.

• **Industrial Satanism:** Heir to the Heavy Metal Satanism of the 1970s and 80s, these modern Infernalists select their foci from a buffet of counterculture trends: piercing, scarification and other forms of body modification; designer drugs; sadomasochistic sex or snuff films. Goth-Industial music provides the soundtrack to their rebellious acts of devotion to demons, dark gods and social nihilism.

• **Witchcraft:** The oldest and most common form of Infernal magic, witchcraft refers to the deliberate use of folk magic to harm individuals or the community. It is a world-wide phenomenon, from the Zulu *umthakathi* and Cherokee *'sgili* to Voudoun *bokkors* and Appalachian witchwomen. The power of cursing is almost universal, while weather control and shapeshifting are also common. Some are known to steal souls or even summon up demons to take revenge on their enemies. Such sorcerers frequently sell their services to those desperate — or angry — enough to meet their price.

• **High Magic:** Like witchcraft, Infernal high magic is seen around the world. Asian Infernalists have elaborate rituals and ceremonies dating back to the reign of the Yellow Emperor. Western Infernalists practice magic that was first developed in the cities of Babylon and Egypt, as well as blasphemous perversions of Catholic or Orthodox ritual. The Aztecs and the Incas also contribute their fair share of Infernal high magic.

• **Infernal Science:** The character's magic is distinguished from the Technocracy's Enlightened Science only by its dark resonance and underlying malevolence. Medical science becomes ways to create disease rather than cure it; engineering leads to more and more methods of destruction; psychology becomes a way to cause madness rather than cure it. Computers, drugs, hypermathematics, electronic devices and high-tech weapons serve as the character's foci.

• **Psionics:** The character's mind provides the focus for Hell's power. Psychokinesis (pyrokinesis, telekinesis, cryokinesis) becomes a focus for Forces or even Matter effects. Mind magic allows telepathy, astral projection, and mental domination, while Time and Correspondence allow for divination. Psychic vampirism is possible with Mind, Life and Prime magic. While this form of magic lacks the reliance on extensive rituals or tools, it does require mental focus and concentration on the Infernalist's part. Many such Infernalists have an object — a crystal, ring, mirror, VR rig, sensory deprivation chamber — which aids in this concentration.

The Infernalist may also attempt to camouflage the Resonance resulting from her demonic pacts. Each success on a Wits + Subterfuge roll (difficulty 7) allows the character to negate the side effects of one level of Resonance.

Signs: None (that's the whole point).

Side Effects: As an embodiment of deception, the character no longer trusts her own inner nature. All Willpower rolls are made at -1 to her dice pool.

• **Regeneration** (4 or 9 points)

The power of Hell infuses the character's body and helps repair and rebuild physical damage. For 4 points, the Infernalist heals one health level of bashing damage per turn and heals one health level of lethal damage per day (the wound heals 24 hours after being received). For 9 points, he heals one health level of bashing or lethal damage per turn and heals one level of aggravated damage per day.

In each version, the character may regenerate while engaged in combat and other stressful activities by making a Stamina roll (difficulty 8) each turn. This roll is reflexive, so the player does not have to split his dice pools. Success means that the character heals as normal. Failure indicates that he heals no damage, and a botch means he cannot regenerate until he has a chance to rest.

Regeneration renders the character immune to any mundane diseases, and increases the Infernalist's life span. Lesser regeneration (4 points) adds 20 years to the character's natural life span; Greater regeneration (9 points) adds 50 years.

Signs: Lack of illness and rapid recovery from injury may raise suspicions, but may also be dismissed as coincidental magic.

Side Effects: Some Infernalists require additional catalysts, such as human flesh or blood, in order to regenerate lethal (lesser) or aggravated (greater) damage. Others develop mental derangements resulting in sadism, megalomania, an obsession with self-mutilation and/or a complete desensitization to violence and human suffering.

• **Relentless** (10 points)

The very power of Hell drives the character toward her goals. Once the Infernalist puts her mind to something, nothing will stop her — not even death. The character does not suffer any dice penalties from damage until she is reduced to Crippled. If killed, she will return to "life" one turn later and continue her task, but with a -1 penalty to all dice rolls. Each time the character is killed, she will gain an additional -1 penalty until reaching -5. At this point, if the Infernalist is killed again, she will be dead for good.

Signs: None, until the character dies for the first time. At that point, the character is a walking corpse.

Side Effects: The character's obsessive aura tends to make others uncomfortable in her presence, while her single-mindedness makes it difficult to deal with those who don't share her goals. Add +1 to the difficulty of all Social rolls not involving Intimidation.

• **Right Hand of Doom** (8 points)

The forces of chaos and destruction dwells within the Infernalist's form, making his very touch destructive. The character inflicts two additional dice of damage during hand-to-hand combat, and by spending a Willpower point may inflict aggravated damage. In addition, with the expenditure of a Willpower point, the Infernalist may "eat" his way through locks, body armor, flesh and other materials just by touching them.

Signs: Infernalists with this power frequently develop the habit of wearing gloves and some go as far as to develop an aversion to any sort of casual physical contact. In addition, see the side effects below.

Side Effects: Those with this power frequently emit an aura of decay and destruction — the grass dies as they walk on it; plants wither and metal tarnishes in their presence; wood gnarls and metal rusts at their touch.

• **Shapeshifter** (4 points)

The Devil has gifted his servent with the power to assume the form of one of his favored beasts. The character may spend a Willpower point to take on a single alternate form: that of an animal associated with witchcraft or black magic within the culture of the Infernalist, or of the demon with which he bargains. Black cats, rats, ravens, crows, owls, hyenas, leopards, wolves, squid, jaguars, foxes and serpents are just some of the possibilities. Note that this power does not carry with it the same risks as shapeshifting via Life magic.

Signs: The character's aura may develop signs of the Infernalist's bestial nature. Many such Infernalists develop the flaw Primal Marks.

Side Effects: None, save the possible signs listed above.

• **Stormwarden** (2 points or 4 points)

Hell's blessings render the Infernalist immune to the effects of the Avatar Storm. This functions identically to the Stormwarden merit on page 295 of **Mage: the Ascension**.

Signs: None.

Side Effects: None.

• ***Youth and Longevity*** (1 point per decade)

The Devil revitalizes and rejuvenates the Infernalist's body. The character becomes ten years younger for every point spent. Alternately, the Infernalist may choose to instead halt his natural aging process for a period of ten years per point spent. Not a powerful ability in and of itself, but the temptation can start many down the path of corruption.

Signs: Unless the character stays out of sight long enough to make plastic surgery possible, people will notice the sudden shift in appearance. Even then, no amount of plastic surgery can explain someone looking 40 or 50 years younger. People also tend to notice if someone hasn't aged after several decades.

Side Effects: None. Many become addicted to their artificial youth or longevity, however, and obsessively commit to new pacts as soon as the benefits of the previous one begin to wane.

The Devil-Eaten

There are times when a demon will do more than simply possess a victim. These unfortunate souls are slowly devoured, as the demon reshapes the host's mind, body and soul into something more suitable for service to Hell. Several Traditions have their own formal and archaic names for these creatures, but to most they are simply the devil-eaten.

The origins of the devil-eaten are diverse — botched summoning rituals, acts of extreme wickedness which attract the attention of demons, deliberate creation to serve as enforcers for more skilled Infernalists, or even random happenstance — but they share certain similarities. All are twisted in either body or mind, if not both, and willing to commit the most vile crimes imaginable. They possess horrific powers unhampered by Paradox, but neither Reality nor Nature will abide their presence for long. The devil-eaten either burns out — often dying in combat — or fades away. The human body's pattern is not meant to be warped and tangled in such a manner, and the wretched creature

suffers a total pattern breakdown, usually dissolving into a viscous sludge after three to five years. Some demons are powerful enough to keep the host body going for decades or even centuries, creating monstrosities of awesome power.

Mages typically encounter the devil-eaten as members of Infernalist cults, slaves to demons or Nephandi, or as predators who roam the more desolate rural and urban corners of the World of Darkness, either as lone wolves or in packs. A handful of Hermetic demonologists have been known to bind devil-eaten into their service, and the occasional Etherite mad scientist has been recorded as creating one or two by accident and trying to use it as a lab assistant. The creatures' compulsions to engage in socio- and psychopathic behavior, however, make for poor servants, and ensure that the practice remains in an unfavorable light.

Powers of the Devil-Eaten

The average devil-eaten — if such a thing exists — typically has three powers, chosen from the list of Infernal Investments (Devil Body Characteristics each count as individual powers). Younger, weaker or more subtle creatures may have only one or even none at all. Older or more powerful ones may have as many as five or more. Truly rare and ancient monsters of legend may have as *many as a dozen* powers, including multiple versions of the same powers. Very rarely will a devil-eaten have access to Sorcery, Infernal or otherwise, unless the host body was already skilled in such arts. Psychic abilities (at three dots or higher) are more common.

The Mechanics of Possession

Regardless of how it occurs, the mechanics of becoming one of the devil-eaten fall into one of two categories: Direct and Subtle. Direct possession is quick and forceful. This is frequently the result of Nephandi, Infernalists or Demon Lords purposely attempting to create a devil-eaten servant as the demon brutally invades and attempts to devour the host's mind and soul. The demon makes a Gnosis roll (difficulty equal to the host's Willpower) to enter and seize control of the host's body. The number of successes indicate how long it takes for the possession to occur (a single success equals six hours; six or more successes indicates an instantaneous possession).

Once inside and in control, the demon must now devour the host's mind. This is a direct contest of wills, and is handled with a resisted roll between demon's Willpower traits (such demons typically

have a Willpower of 4 to 8, depending on how successful the summoning ritual was). If the demon wins, the host's mind and soul cease to be (save what memories the demon chooses to keep) and the body quickly mutates into its new devil-eaten form. If the host wins, the demon is cast back into whatever foul pit spawned it and the host remains as it was.

For those who are subtly possessed, the conversion into one of the devil-eaten is a gradual process. The demon whispers quietly into the host's mind, urging him to give in to his darker impulses and desires. These whispers begin as gentle suggestions, but as the demon works its way into the host's mind they slowly build into strong compulsions (must roll Willpower, difficulty 6 to resist) and even obsessions (must spend a Willpower point to resist).

As this mental and spiritual corruption is carried out, the body is also slowly corrupted and the devil-eaten's powers manifest one by one. Eventually, the demon attempts a complete takeover, and the now worn-down and weakened (and probably nearly insane) host must make a resisted Willpower contest against the demon. At the Storyteller's discretion, this may be an extended roll as well. If the demon wins, another devil-eaten is born into the world; if the host wins, he manages to hold out for a while longer but still has the demon trapped in his mind. If the demon botches, then the host is freed, but he will very likely need medical attention and counseling to deal with the physical, psychological and spiritual trauma he has undergone.

Awakened Devil-Eaten

Mages, being human, are just as vulnerable to demonic possession as anyone else, if not more so. Walking through the dark corners of the World of Darkness and journeying through the Umbra have their risks, after all. Mechanics for Awakened devil-eaten work as above, but there are some additional details which require special mention.

For gradual possession, the worst comes when the demon begins to physically alter its host's pattern and the Infernal taint begins to manifest. For every power that the Awakened victim develops, he loses one point from his Arete rating. As his Arete drops, the mage loses his access to the Spheres, as he is no longer able to use Sphere effects higher than his Arete rating. Once the mage's Arete drops to zero, he is no longer able to work magic. At this point, it comes down to a battle of wills between the mage and the demon. If the mage manages to drive the demon out, he's still stuck without any magic. During this entire period of possession, the mage shows a noticeable and steady increase in Entropy Resonance, and this Resonance stays with the devil-eaten (manifesting any time it uses its powers) even after the mage and his Avatar are long gone.

For direct possession, the mage adds his Avatar background to his dice pool when resisting the demon's will. If the demon wins, the mage's ability to work magic is lost, the same as if he'd been turned into a vampire. Mystic scholars debate over whether or not the Avatar is destroyed or if it just moves on. Mages-turned-Devil-eaten are too rare to make any sort of reliable study feasible.

Detection and Cure

Mages may be able to detect the devil-eaten through the use of Life, Mind or Spirit magic. During the early stages of a subtle takeover, the demon can be ejected in the same manner as dealing with normal demonic possession. Once the demon has devoured the victim's psyche, such treatments are no longer an option. It's possible that an Archmage with high enough mastery of Spirit and Mind might be able to separate the demon from its host and restore the victim's mind and soul, but this is only a theory at best. A Master of Life and Mind can (if his paradigm allows such a thing) reconstruct the victim's body and mind, but this will only be a copy. Most likely, the mind will have to be constructed entirely from the impressions of those who knew the victim, and may lack many of the minute details which made the person who she was. Mages recreated this way will not have Awakened Avatars unless Spirit 9 is used.

Sympathy for the Devil

Once a mage has willingly sold his soul to demons, he's pretty much passed the point of no return. To be blunt, only a complete idiot would truck with the Infernal without knowing what he is getting into. Of course, there's always the slim chance of redemption. It's remotely possible that the character might have been able to sneak an escape clause into the pact. However, keep in mind that most demons have been doing this for millennia and it's unlikely that they'll be outsmarted by a mere mortal. Still, there may be an out.

One possibility, occurring frequently in folklore, is to challenge the demon to a contest of skill. Such a contest is typically the last-ditch gamble of an Infernalist who has sold his soul for some form of skill or ability, and almost always involves the skill in question. Many Demon Lords, when agreeing to such a duel, require

that each party choose a proxy for the duel, and that the reneging Infernalist's proxy agree to forfeit her soul if she loses. These duels are an extended as well as a resisted roll, with the time period and number of successes needed left to the Storyteller to decide. Mage folklore is rife with apocryphal stories of such duels, ranging from musical battles and marathon poker games to epic martial-arts contests and even Hermetic certamen. Presumably, the proxy and the repentant Infernalist will have to summon the Demon Lord together and then persuade it to accept the bet.

Another possible option is to undergo a major Seeking. *Such a quest will be extremely difficult, perhaps impossible if the mage's Avatar has already been enslaved.* Inevitably, this will be a nightmarish journey into the depths of the fallen mage's psyche where he will be forced to confront the darkest shadows of his mind and soul (especially those related to the sins which led him down the path of damnation in the first place).

Outside of those two options, there is always the hope of divine intervention, but in the World of Darkness that's a very thin hope. Most mages believe that the only way to redeem a tainted Avatar is execution, or even Gilgul. Of course, this leaves the character dead, but no one ever said redemption was easy.

Ultimately, the ease or impossibility of redemption is entirely up to the Storyteller. Mage is a game about hope, *but it is also a game about facing the consequences of one's actions.*

What Makes My Soul So Damn Important?

One may wonder just why demons consider the souls of fallen mages to be such prize catches. For as long as anyone can remember, the Awakened have been there in one form or another to guide, direct and protect humanity. As shamans, priest-kings and warrior champions, the first mages helped shape the ancient world. The mythical archetype of Merlin is perhaps the most well known example.

Over the centuries and millennia, these roles have evolved and changed but their core concepts remain the same. As scientists, journalists and captains of industry, the Technocracy continues to carry out the old roles of advisors and protectors. As philosophers, teachers and prophets, members of the Traditions also carry out these roles, but typically on a smaller and more personal scale.

This is why demons — as well as the Nephandi — covet the souls of the Awakened. Every Awakened soul enslaved by the forces of darkness means the loss of one more architect of humanity's future. And every Avatar collected by the Lords of Hell grants the darkness that much more influence over the fate of the world.

The Conquerer Wyrm

Players familiar with White Wolf's **Werewolf: the Apocalypse** are aware of the godlike cosmic entity known as the Wyrm (and no, it's not the same thing as the metaphysical concept of Entropy), as well as of the humans who pledge themselves to the service of one or more aspects of it. So, are these Wyrm cultist Nephandi or Infernalists?

Both and neither.

First, ask yourself which game are you playing: **Mage** or **Werewolf**? While they share the same world, the two are entirely separate games. Each *has its own distinct themes and metaphysical* cosmologies. So are you playing a **Mage** game that incorporates **Werewolf** elements or a **Werewolf** game that incorporates **Mage** elements?

If you're playing **Werewolf**, then the Wyrm is the ultimate source of metaphysical evil and Nephandi and Infernalists are each serving part of a schizophrenic whole. On the other hand, if you're playing **Mage** then the Wyrm is just one more cosmic horror among many. Portions of its fractured consciousness have achieved independence and are now just a few of the countless dark beings worshiped by Infernalists. Other portions are simply masks worshiped by the Nephandi who hope to one day free their master from its cosmic prison by destroying all creation. Of course, the Wyrm may simply be another mask for something even more alien and horrific....

Chapter Four: Umbrood

The ways of the Umbra are strange, even to mages. The long-ago separation of material and spirit worlds has left humanity with only vague stories and recollections of the lands of ephemera. Most humans never deal with spirits — at least, not knowingly — and this ignorance applies just as well to newly Awakened mages. So it is that the courts of spirit remain inscrutable, even among magicians.

The Dreamspeakers, foremost among the Traditions, still deal with creatures of spirit. So too does the Order of Hermes retain ancient rites for the binding and summoning of ephemera. Neither house, though, can claim a full understanding of what motivates the beings of the Umbra, from whence they came, why their powers function or what interests they have in humanity. It is for this reason that dealing with the Umbrood is a dangerous course best left to the experienced, the heroic or the crazed: While a human's motives may be unusual but comprehensible, the whims — and attendant supernatural capabilities — of the Umbrood are as varied as the universal forms from which the spirits spring.

From: "Harlan Gandt" <hgandt@recovery.cgv.itx>
To: "Lisa Chatham" <lchatham@admin.cgv.itx>
Subject: URGENT: Machado Decryption, FYEO
Date: Fri, 17 Aug 2001 21:04:29 -0600

• • •

Comptroller Chatham,

I regret to inform you that we have a Class 491a/aa on our hands. Forgive me for sending this to you at the beginning of the weekend, but I felt it vital to bring to your attention as soon as possible. A brief timeline follows:

Today at 1937 hours the Balt decryption reached completion level Gamma. I immediately began parsing and collation. *Their contents proved to be highly sensitive* and I recognized the importance of informing you immediately. However, I felt that the presentation of information was crucial, and set about compiling this report.

Equally as illuminating as Balt's topic of conversation is his correspondent. I shall let the letters speak for themselves:

A Proposal

Cornelius Balt,

I understand you are the one with whom I should speak in regards to matters of a most celestial nature. Your interests parallel my own as of late, and I would ask a moment of your time to consider a proposal that should prove mutually beneficial.

Before I may ask anything of you, I must reveal my intentions. I send this to you from far beyond the known boundaries of time and space. I have not been privy to the human world for more than four centuries. The memories I retain of that realm have mostly faded.

I only know of my own past from my writings and by what I am told. Much of the latter is quite obviously suspect, but serves as litmus for my own written experience. By picking out the more palpable falsehoods, I grow closer to the memory of who I used to be.

You must know that my existence has long since been my own. I am kept alive because I remain the symbol for a hazy dream, the specifics of which are long forgotten. I am nostalgia that draws breath — on the most superficial of levels I provide melancholy to those who have willingly plucked out their own eyes. They act as though my presence allows them to recall the memory of color.

To wit: I am a living figurehead amongst lackeys and sycophants. They have grown to believe their own machinations with a faith stronger than religion. They are gears grinding themselves round to nubs, reinforcing their own perpetuity with every turn, unaware of the grand monstrosity they have unleashed.

When it began, we built walls to protect and shelter. We couldn't know that once we'd chased away the terrors from *without*, we would be the ones to take their place. Left with nothing to focus our intentions upon but our charges, the walls were soon built with barred windows and manacles. We made the adjustment from protector to warden so gradually that we never realized the change.

I would have you know that the gilding has long since worn from my cage. I desire change, and you can help provide it. I wish to discover once more, rather than simply maintain. I yearn to once more enact the Promethean ideal. I want to bring control back to the *Dorminhocos* — the Sleepers. This is why I propose the creation of a central knowledge base intended for their usage, to provide a compelling repository of information that takes advantage of our experience for their benefit.

I am compelled to underscore the necessity of confidentiality. Our discretion in this matter is paramount. Please *understand I am well aware of your* activities, and your interactions with companions both mundane and exotic. This divulgence is not the tired cliché of an extortionist's veiled threat, but a tacit warning. If I am aware of this, it is because my organization keeps you under an amount of observation. *Lack of secrecy on your part will reveal* this nascent conspiracy. I also wish to confirm that your most recent methods of temporal avoidance are currently undetectable by our technologies. I encourage you to keep using them.

Xadreque Machado
Elevado Iluminador
Ordem da Razão
2 March 1995

Balt's Acceptance

Xadreque Machado,

I am not unfamiliar with your own reputation. It is truly unfortunate that the path you had once chosen for yourself has begun to chafe. You have little to fear from me with respect to confidentiality from me. *I have long since learned* the value of discretion in the context of my research.

I will not bore you with my personal history at this time. I suspect you know as much as I would be willing to reveal in such a correspondence already. Suffice it to say, that I have been studying the nature of things for a very long time. *Enough* time, in fact, that some of my colleagues have determined to me to be a useful training resource for young will-workers. This pleases me. The opportunity to lecture encourages to me to learn more, leading to a delightful cycle sorts. You should not fear for my availability for the project you propose, however, as the concept fascinates me. I eagerly agree to your proposal.

There are numerous details to work out in the implementation of this project. For the time being however, I suggest we begin working via written missive. That way, we can discuss concepts in a casual format. If this is an acceptable medium of intellectual discourse, then I look forward to your next letter.

In your last letter you referenced my "methods of temporal avoidance." What an interesting turn of phrase! However, I assure you I do not know to what you refer. I look most sincerely forward to hearing from again,

C. Balt
Lecturer Emirtus,
Various
March 4th, 1995

• • •

As you can see, Machado initiated contact with the deviant. Transfer records support this, and further investigation shows that the likelihood of false authenticity is close to null. I know that you are all too aware of Balt and his past transgressions against our greater interests, so I will refrain from reiteration.

Many more letters followed between the correspondents. Most were meticulously digitized and archived by Balt, yet there are numerous gaps in the correspondence. I am certain this is indicative of multiple threads of conversation, some of which Balt considered too important to be stored in more than one place. I venture that he retains the only copies of such communication or had them destroyed.

They soon reached a consensus on the format of their repository: a series of novels to be published and sold within Sleeper circles. Consequently, much of what was decrypted consists of letters and essays written in preparation for inclusion in such format. As the files themselves are quite lengthy, I have included a series of applicable excerpts, organized under topics of my own devising. I felt it best to provide you with Balt's correspondence rather than my own words. My comments follow throughout, italicized for ease of reference.

Structure of the First Book

Xadreque Machado,

I was pleased to receive your reply. I look forward to exchanging ideas with you in the process of developing our tome.

Before we begin, however, I feel it is important that we review a number of concepts so that we certain we understand each other's points of view. Some important questions that immediately leap to mind follow. Previous researchers have spent a significant amount of time on the nature of the greater reality. How accurate is the information they have presented? I feel their description and categorization of the so-called "Three Worlds" is reasonable, as far as it goes. I also feel, however, that they have neglected the nature of the borders between those worlds. At the same time, I feel that the categorization previous authors have applied to natives of the etheric realms needs to be reviewed. Certainly the major beings have been well-documented, but I suspect the lesser beings have perhaps been misrepresented to a certain extent. I have been experimenting with a new set of nomenclature to classify these etheric beings and have prepared a series of brief monographs on specific individuals illustrating the strengths and weakness of the previous distinctions.

The final set of concepts that leaps to mind for review is that of the bureaucracy of the etheric realms. It is my opinion that etheric pranksters have potentially misled previous writers with regard to the so-called Umbral Courts. I suspect, from my research, that the courts are a much more fluid set of organizations than previously revealed. My investigations have revealed that an etheric being's rank within the courts can change over time, and that, indeed, the nature of the courts themselves tends to shift and flow as a sort of reflection of the mortal worlds.

I am certain other questions weigh heavily on your mind, and that other questions will present themselves as we proceed with the project. This is to be expected, and, in my opinion, is the exciting part of such discourse and research.

I look forward to your reply.

C. Balt
Lecturer Emirtus,
Various
March 27th, 1995

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Correspondent Balt,

I believe we are in agreement. Your topics of choice leave us much to consider, and allow for multiple case studies and subsequent interpretations.

As an aside, we must be careful in our approach. We are directing this endeavor at the "common man" and not the ranks of our own establishments. We should strive to present information with little bias and remember for whom this is written.

Xadreque Machado
29 March 1995

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This debate continued for some time before Balt and Machado finally settled on their subject of choice. Certain portions of these letters appear to be excised, leaving only the elements relating to the topics of the two letters above. Presumably they spoke of additional themes, perhaps too broad for the extent of their initial focus. It is unknown whether they proceeded with such plans, if they existed. Interpretation is left to the reader.

TERMINOLOGY

Correspondent Balt,

I must respectfully disagree with your insistence on calling all that lies beyond earth the "Etheric Realms." I understand that our purpose is to provide a new and complete explanation of what lies beyond, and in so doing we have an opportunity to revolutionize terminologies and concepts. Nevertheless, to do as you suggest would undermine our intentions.

Umbra is an old word rooted amongst the Sleepers. Derived from Latin, the language of scholars and conquerors, it means "shadow." For centuries it has been an appropriate description of the regions beyond the realm of earth. I wish not to brook offense, yet feel it necessary to point out that "Etheric Realms" are tied completely to the conception of "Ether" — a theory that, within Sleeper circles, was disproved over one century ago. To immediately associate our work with an "invalid" scientific theory from the prior century could potentially detract from an already shaky regard most readers might hold for our validity.

In regards to the word "Umbrood" describing the beings native to the Umbra, I feel this is our best choice in conveying the concept. Though I personally dislike the word, it is succinct and inherently attached to the concept of the Umbra. This connection is something our readers must understand: whereas they are individuals living within a world that aligns itself along philosophies, companionships and artificial borders, the Umbral denizens are themselves directly tied to their environment. They are not afforded choice, for they simply *are*, attached to their surroundings by the vagaries of belief, Umbral metaphor and details, of which perhaps we are not fully aware.

Placing terminology aside for the time being, this brings to mind a point we should explore. The unique relationship that Umbrood share with the Umbra itself is not something I entirely understand, and relevant theories are somewhat sparse amongst my own pool of research. Perhaps you can share your own theories at a future point. An analysis of this Umbral affiliation would be invaluable to Sleeper comprehension of Umbrood motives and predilections. A discussion of the difference between Umbrood and "living creatures" might also be in order.

Another important aspect to detail involves the different types of Umbrood that exist. We should provide a general categorization of what the Sleepers can expect to encounter once they have gained the capabilities of Umbral exploration. A redefinition of terms in that regard is not only

a good idea, but a necessity. What, in your experience, can the average Umbral traveler be expected to encounter amongst the various types of Umbrood? Speak in generalities, for we shall boil them down to specifics later.

Xadreque Machado
21 August 1995

• • •

Colleague Machado,

I see that our discussions will be as intellectually stimulating as I had hoped. Your arguments are intriguing, even if your reference to Ether as an invalid theory borders on insulting. I will, however, assume that you did not mean any offense and consider your thoughts purely on the basis of their merit.

That said, I am still unconvinced about the use of the terms Umbra and Umbrood. However, in the spirit of cooperation, I will attempt to shift to these terms. You should be aware that many of my notes shall still refer to the Etheric as this is how I best understand them. Specifically, you see these terms in the following discussion that, I think, addresses your questions about the various types of Umbrood.

What are Spirits?

Spirits, or more properly, *etheric spirits*, are defined as those entities who reside in the Etheric Realms. (Previous authors have used the term Umbra and the divisions Near and Deep Umbra to refer to the Etheric Realms. For reasons discussed elsewhere, this nomenclature is not completely appropriate, and thus will not be used in this discussion.) More specifically, spirits are those beings whose "physical" bodies are made up of some variety of ether, the matter of the Etheric Realms. As discussed elsewhere in more detail, the exact properties of ether are altered by the nature of the energies running through it. Thus, the distinctions made by previous authors, referring specifically to ephemera and plasm, are more properly classed as sub-types of ether.

Mundanes, or mortals, cannot in general affect spirits without magic unless that spirit is materialized. Certain properties, such as lycanthropic or fae genetic coding, or the intensive study of Spirit magic, do allow successful interaction of de-materialized spirits. As noted elsewhere, there are many material pockets scattered through out the Etheric Realms, and all the standard interaction properties apply within these pockets. Ether is a very pliable substance when it comes to manipulating objects in the Etheric, but spirits with willpower cannot be so easily affected.

Practical Distinctions of Those From Beyond

Celestines or Incarna

Etheric spirits are highly influenced by the belief of mortals from the various material pockets in the greater Etheric Realms. Those known in less enlightened times as gods have managed to collect the attention of the universal subconscious. There is no doubt that this attention has granted them incredible power. It is suspected, however, that if the attention of mortals could be shifted elsewhere, such beings could be weakened, crippled or reduced in rank.

Ghosts

Historically, ghosts were considered to be the souls of dead people or destroyed objects that refuse to pass on to their final rest. A more accurate definition would be to recognize that ghosts are bits of ether that have been shaped and granted powers by the passions of the persons or objects whose form they mimic and by the mortals who remember them. Regardless of the definition, ghosts can be contacted or battled by those sufficiently trained in spirit magic.

Realm Creatures

This unfortunate nomenclature refers to the native inhabitants of material pockets within the Etheric Realms. They are as substantial as any mage and their home worlds are as real and as natural to them as the home realm of the reader is to him.

Demons and Demon Hordes

These horrors are discussed in more detail elsewhere. This author hesitates to differentiate them from other spirits, as the category is defined by their actions and intentions rather than their nature. Some researchers lump etheric spirits calling themselves or described as "Angels" into this category as well.

Paradox Spirits

Paradox spirits are etheric creatures that serve as reality's antibodies. Earlier authors have postulated that these beings are spontaneously generated by the subconscious fears of mages. Given the recorded explorations of realms that serve as home to such entities, it seems more likely that they come from such pockets in search of those who break a particular reality's laws too flagrantly.

Bygones

Also know as mythic beasts, these are material creatures that fled or were taken into the Etheric Realms when magic became suppressed on Earth. Some travel on their own power, while others must be summoned or carried by Spirit magic. Bygones are most often physical beings.

Drones

The Etheric Realms are filled with a nigh infinite number of spirits that appear virtually identical to even the most observant willworker. Though these creatures often serve as the minions of more powerful spirits, a mage should be careful in underestimating them. They often have personal identities that they can differentiate. Even the most harmless of them can prove to be an incredibly influential spirit.

Abstracts

Some etheric spirits defy classification. Abstracts are spirits that fit in no other category. They dwell in the deepest corners of the Etheric Realms. Authors have described them

from anything as 'indescribable' to 'a chaotic collection of *geometric figures*'. They are born of concepts and ideas that alien to even the most enlightened willworkers, and yet they cling to their wisps of reality more firmly than most mundanes.

AFTERWORD

I hope that you find this discussion useful. I will attempt to gather my thoughts on the politics of these beings for a future letter. As always, I look forward to your thoughts.

C. Balt
Lecturer Emirtus,
Various
August 26th, 1995

• • •

Correspondent Balt,

All those seem very salient points. Perhaps we would be better served to reconsider the overall division of Umbrood, picking apart the commonly held assumptions until we grasp the core of the matter and then reconstruct them along lines more easily comprehended by our Sleeper audience. A re-examination is not only prudent but entirely necessary for our own purposes, as it allows more control over the substance of our text. By providing our own terminology, we tightly maintain the purpose of the novels and can refer to all we encounter in our own words.

Consider, then, the sheer chaos inherent with Umbrood. Think for a moment of the millions upon billions of Umbrood written of by Sleeper and Enlightened alike. Tales abound, conflict with one another and confuse the extent to which each Umbrood affects the world and those within it. With such a broad, massive and contradictory pool to draw from, how can we possibly provide such a system for this reclassification? Should we set about cataloguing each Umbrood for the edification of the reader? Surely not; the sheer effort involved with such a task would take more effort and time than even your strange abilities could provide. No, even a simple pooling of all knowledge on this subject would crash the great Computer, for the amount of data at hand is simply too vast.

Worse yet, the data often represents the recorded, misinterpreted accounts of a biased source. I include Technocratic authors within this assessment, for even adhering to the scientific method can produce as wholly inaccurate results as those found amongst much of your Traditions. There is simply no control group, for the maddening part of it is that Umbrood often alter a portion of themselves and their behavior to provide interactions with Sleeper or Enlightened that partially conform to the beholder's expectations. (More on this phenomena later, perhaps in the form of an essay I shall draft.)

What soon becomes evident is the broad, vastly innumerable Umbrood for which we must account. Rather than waste our time with an endless cataloguing, we must reflect on this quandary and provide a system that imposes bounds upon

the supranatural order of things. Such a system must account for the millions of terms for various and sundry Umbrood held by Sleeper, Enlightened and even Umbrood themselves.

Even with such an expansive array of terms, listing many of the various kinds together allows us to find the limits of our bounds. Attaching more general attributes held by all in question, eclipsing the superficial, allows us to see this matter quickly become one of scale. Certainly not in the sense of "size," for which we must take care to explain to our Sleeper audience. Rather, scale of celestial influence — "Etheric potence," I imagine you would call it. In other words, the overall limit to the effect an Umbrood may express upon its surroundings, other Umbrood, the Umbra at large and most importantly, the realm of earth and its denizens.

Below I provide a rough sample of terminology broken down to encompass this categorization. Should you agree with my assessment of its necessity, perhaps we can provide the Sleepers with a term more amenable to their understanding. "Spirit Phyla," maybe. Perhaps "Celestial Taxonomy?" Please provide your thoughts on the matter.

My Umbrood Classification follows, from those with the most influence to those with the least.

Divinity

I hesitate to use this term at all within the context of the Umbra. To provoke religious connotations when dealing with metaphysical beings of this kind leaves a sour taste in my mouth, for the Sleepers could easily misinterpret this to mean "gods" attached to each "religion" for which they ascribe. However, this category accounts for beings with such vast influence and power that even the Enlightened would mistake it for omnipotence. They are of such relative importance to the Umbra that their sway is, in some ways, thought to cross all levels, realms and pocket realities.

However, for all the influence held by a divinity, none of it is direct. It must accomplish all by proxy, through tools or beings of its own creation. Within all Enlightened knowledge and experience, a divinity cannot immediately and irrevocably alter the existence of reality. Certainly it can command its proxies to do so, but divinities themselves seem hamstrung by their very existence. Current theories suspect they may themselves comprise reality, that the very Umbra is a collection of divinities; that the realm of earth is an amalgamation of all divinities into a corporeal shell, whereas other realms are themselves portions of a single divinity. I grow wary of analogizing the realms beyond earth as the "internal organs of divinity," but the theory lends itself to the true scope of the matter.

For your own context, those amongst your Traditions refer to these beings as celestines or "uthras." Within this redefinition I have wrapped those beings of even greater power — "The One," your "Gaia," that which your texts submit as "Ialdabaoth" and to which humans call "Satan," the Umbood known as "the Wyrm," etc. Functionally there may be a difference between these beings and celestines, but these Umbrood are so vast that distinction between them is rather pointless. To do so is akin to saying "twice infinity" — pure nonsense. I remain convinced that such a celestial hierarchy at those levels shall remain ever incomprehensible to human minds, even Enlightened ones.

As a brief appendix to your comment that Celestines are themselves influenced by human belief, I hesitate to suggest that human worship alone remains responsible for the existence of divinities. Certainly they provide a strong affect upon these Umbrood. However, to make such an assumption without any form of direct proof is to accept a belief commonly held by Sleepers as Truth. To preclude spiritual arguments, I state that I do not doubt divinities are indeed affected by Sleeper and Enlightened alike, or that worship is itself a factor. I simply doubt that worship is solely responsible for their existence and influence.

Avatar

More distinct than a divinity, an avatar often encompasses beings which themselves represent the direct connection a divinity has to the affectation of reality itself. An avatar is the condensed power of a divinity given form, focus and direction. It is unknown whether an avatar is a divine simulacrum "built" and commanded to carry out tasks (as I would construct automata to carry out more menial errands), or are perhaps themselves the direct extensions of divinities who "see through" the avatar's "eyes" and direct its motions (as I would virtually enter within the Digital Web).

Whatever the truth, the influence of an avatar is much less than that of a divinity. Whereas divinities themselves thread themselves throughout the universe, so to speak, an avatar is limited to the areas in which a divinity bears influence. Beyond this, avatars are tied to (and in some cases, represent) specific concepts, often an aspect of the divinity's influence. Debate still continues whether avatars are themselves "incarnate," taking the Umbral analogy of "physical form," or whether they are themselves too close to divinity to ever truly "incorporate."

Such an idea remains a topic for debate that unfortunately lies beyond the scope of our text, however interesting it may be. Regardless, we should mention that there remains little definitive proof that an avatar has ever directly and completely entered the realm of earth. Certainly their own proxies have been known to do so, and perhaps some loose an aspect of themselves into the realm, but whether they can actually enter the realm or whether they simply imply they can remains a point of contention.

Your Tradition calls these beings Incarna or "Aeons," an earlier usage. Certain schools of thought believe avatars are the direct face of worshipped beings. One Enlightened scholar whom I correspond with suggested to some Sleeper colleagues that most current human religions venerate the multiple avatars of a single divinity, in the form of "God" or

"Allah" or "Papa Legba," amongst others. Unfortunately the debate ended abruptly when all involved came to blows, so perhaps we should avoid including such an example in the text that reaches Sleeper perusal.

Sovereign

Those I label "sovereign" enjoy a somewhat unique position amongst these various levels of influence, for they serve as a spiritual bridge to the various levels of Umbrood. Within this scale, sovereigns remain the last "rank" of Umbrood to enjoy any sort of direct influence or control of their surroundings, yet also find themselves heavily bound in servitude to a greater power. This precarious position nevertheless affords a great deal of latitude for these Umbrood. Often created at the behest of a specific avatar, they serve their masters by directing their own minions in furthering the purpose for which they were created.

Few sovereigns retain whole realms of their own, often finding themselves in opposition to other sovereigns, some of which may serve the same avatar as they. Many sovereigns seem embroiled in a complex exaggeration of Umbral conflict that involves the warring of their minions. Is this representative of "conflicting ideas?" Certainly in some areas of the Umbra, wherein Umbrood themselves are concepts. What elsewhere, then?

The specific influence that sovereigns enjoy varies between each. Often their patron avatars limit them in one specific manner or another. They can usually create and direct their own minions, from rather few numbers of powerful underlings to vast amounts of individually inconsequential, but collectively significant Umbrood. "Strength" or "power" in relation to sovereigns is entirely relative: a sovereign could itself be quite fragile, but control a specific aspect of a realm which makes it powerful within that context.

An idea: Umbrood with lesser influence might become elevated to the position of sovereign, either by an avatar or simply through persistence of Sleeper belief. The idea of sovereigns unattached to any greater Umbrood intrigues me. These "free agents" would be rare, if they existed at all, and would serve to further their own goals, entirely autonomous of a superior's wishes. What are the goals of such a sovereign? Do avatars search for sovereigns such as these to incorporate within their own plans? Can these sovereigns travel through most realms, or are they limited to the ones in which they themselves most appropriately conform? Is there a place in the Umbra where free sovereigns congregate, avoiding the ceaseless conflict of their peers? Perhaps a topic for further discussion at a later date.

You may have heard sovereigns referred to as "lords" or "totem avatars." Myth is a strange thing, no doubt. Many of the suspected "demon lords" fall under this category, and references to a "Court of Shadows" imply the leaders of such fall under this title. What seems self-evident upon perusal of my resources at hand is that Sleepers are much more likely to have contact with sovereigns and their minions than any divinity or avatar. In fact, some sovereigns remain at the forefront of human consciousness, reinforced by the subtleties of Sleeper belief. Even though they exist at the forefront of consciousness, few Sleepers actively believe such Umbrood truly exist.

I suspect avatars which either lose favor with their divinity or are intentionally "forgotten" in favor of newer avatars slowly waste away to become sovereigns. What becomes of these lost avatars is unknown, but the Sleepers should be well aware that some sovereigns encountered amongst the Umbrood may have at one time existed as the mouthpiece of a god. Should a divinity once more look kindly upon it, would the sovereign return to its former state? I know of no instances in which this occurs, but perhaps you are aware.

Majordomo

Occasionally an Umbrood exhibits strong subservience to a master, yet is still provided with the capability of making its own decisions. I've labeled these Umbrood "majordomo," for they exist to carry out the orders of their masters, yet often enjoy broad interpretation and confidence in doing so. Most are considered "self-aware" and are at least as intelligent as the average Enlightened.

The distinction between majordomo and sovereign can be a fine one. I submit that whereas sovereigns identifiably control an area or aspect of the Umbra, the extent to which a majordomo influences rarely extends beyond itself.

Tradition texts refer to "preceptors" and include more advanced "Court servitors" within this description. Obscure references mention "jagglings" or "pack totems," though such usage seems outdated.

Subordinate

I hesitate to make the analogy, but I consider subordinates to be the willing slaves of the Umbra. Few are anything we would mistake for self-aware, often exhibiting the personalities of simple caricatures, if any at all. They generally represent a "small slice of universal essence," as I'm told I said at an earlier point in my life. When encountering these creatures, I am oft reminded of automata or the current state of synthetic intelligence amongst Sleeper theorists.

Avatars, sovereigns and the occasional majordomo can manufacture subordinates, with capabilities often derivative of the creator. Their single-minded tenacity often leads to the mistaken idea of unswerving devotion, but my experiences leads me to consider them semi-sentient tools capable only of what they were designed, within certain parameters.

The Umbrood I consider as part of this category are lesser minions of the Courts, or most any subservient spirit created to fulfill a lesser task. Your more obscure texts mention "gafflings," "epiphlings" and "naturae," though I remain unfamiliar with any of those terms.

ADDENDUM

I expect that, even with this system of definition, we shall discover exceptions to the rule. This is a matter of course when dealing with Umbrood. They are themselves exceptions. They break rules. When interacting with them in any manner, one must simply remember that guidelines are just that: vague categorizations which give one a general conception of what to expect.

For example, the "strength" of any one Umbrood does not necessarily coincide with its hierarchical position, particularly within context of Sleepers or even the Enlightened. Certainly divinities are exponentially vaster than anything even our minds could hope to conceive, with avatars approaching the borders of inconceivability themselves.

An additional consideration must be made for certain "flavors" of spirits that cross all levels of the Classification. Elementals of infernals provide good examples, for expressions of these flavors can be found at all levels. Others include Umbrood which are direct expressions of and expansions upon the realm of earth's natural state. Many flavors exist, from classifications of human religion to the denizens of the realms of the dead. I hesitate to call such expressions "infinite," but remain convinced they number close to that.

Xadreque Machado
3 September 1995

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Xadreque Machado,

My colleague, I hope this letter finds you well. In response to the suspicions you expressed in your first missive, I did some checking of my own. Indeed, it does appear that someone is attempting to intercept our research. I have thus taken some additional precautions, the nature of which should become apparent to you shortly. Until we are certain of those responsible for this intrusion, these precautions should be sufficient.

But enough talk of unpleasant things. I would like to take the time to comment in particular on the nature of so-called Ghosts at this time. While the existing theories on such Etheric beings have certainly proved sound thus far, I would like to propose my own, based on what I can the parallel processing phenomena. I postulate that instead of being the actual spirits of the deceased, ghosts are actually spontaneously generated by material beings as they review their lives and regrets at the instant of death.

The thoughts associated with such spontaneously generated spirits are the reinforced by the memories of the living. I believe this theory also explains the distinctions between ghosts and other Etheric beings. While most of the so-called Umbrood are spontaneously generated by original thought (I will pursue this concept further later), Ghosts are generated only by intense thought and emotions. This also explains the creation of 'Ghost Objects'. This phenomenon seems tied to objects deemed important to material beings. Thus the destruction of such intensely thought-about objects is effectively identical to the destruction of a thinking being.

Additionally, I have attempted to describe the nature of politics in the Etheric Realms. As we have discussed, this is a complex task requiring one to peel away multiple levels of deception and to understand the workings of the most mysterious of magics. I hope that my humble prose captures a sufficient fragment of the truth.

I look forward to your response.

Co. Balt
Lecturer Emeritus
September 10th, 1995

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I shall refrain from commenting upon Machado until the end. However, I offer a brief observation. Balt's potential for danger was obviously not understated. Culling through this and other letters he sent to Machado, it soon becomes obvious that many of his ideas fall along similar principles as our own teachings, though the specifics invariably differ. Yet, his adherence to an observable Method shows that his techniques are, for all intents and purposes, identical to our own. I further comprehend the dangers that the superstitionists represent, for they could easily recruit those amongst our own members who are of a rather fractured loyalty by expressing these similar ideas, providing the illusion that they are simply another Convention with their own set of Methods.

Luckily, any member of the Union, even those more particularly disgruntled, should have no trouble recognizing the sheer absurdity of some of their ideas. For instance, many of the essays and letters spoke of "politics" amongst these Umbrood. They seemed to speak as though these creatures interacted with one another on a social level! I believe this is pure speculation and outright exaggeration, surely the product of fractured minds. Alternatively, perhaps they spoke of our internal structures in some sort of code? I couldn't pick out any direct parallels, but am only truly aware of my own Convention. Please look for any attempts to reveal the Union's secrets on Machado's part.

UMBROOD POLITICS

Xadreque Machado,

As promised, I have been considering my experiences with the politics of the spiritual world. The following discussion is a summary of my experiences and research. I hope you find it illuminating.

THE POLITICS OF THE ETHERIC REALMS

The Ethric Realms are home to a constantly changing political construct named the Umbral Court by earlier writers. While these writers were correct to observe that politics is as strong in the spiritual realms as in the material, if not stronger, they are responsible for perpetuating several key fallacies. These authors are not to be blamed, however for these errors. The Etheric Realms present a constantly changing face to non-natives, and there is no small number

of Etheric Spirits eager to mislead young willworkers. It will thus be the attempt of this author to cut through the illusion and the chaos to reveal the true political structure beneath.

The so-called Court of Shadows is a political structure in which those perceived to have the most power rise to the top. The key to success is thus apparent power, rather than actual capability. As a result, ancient spirits who have worked their way into high-ranking positions tend to stay in those positions. At the same time, the ancient spirits often them find themselves on equal footing with young upstarts who have just amassed enough power to gain high rank, not necessarily hold it. This flexibility is both a strength and a weakness. On one hand, the consistency of the ancient spirits provides a static nature to material reality. On the other hand, the constantly changing structure causes many etheric spirits to debate the right of the Court to rule.

In the past, it has been postulated that there are three Courts, a Western Court, an Eastern Court, and an Egyptian Court. While they are correct that at various times there were courts that resembled these organizations, it is highly unlikely that more than one existed at any one time. Instead, those researchers most likely encountered either reflections of past courts or clever etherics presenting a charade for their own purposes. In fact, reflections of even older Courts have been encountered, in particular, the Lodge of the Sky. Then again, time flows strangely at the outer edges of the Etheric Realms. Who is to say that the reflections are not instead lost fragments of the past? And if this is true, how long will it be until reflections of future courts make an impression on some young mage?

Rank and Title

The lords of the Court follow a strict hierarchy of ranks and titles. The exact titles they share with outsiders have changed often over time. These pseudonyms regularly seem to be taken to reflect (or perhaps mock) the political structures of material courts familiar to the mortal willworkers who discover them. These public systems are believe to be the whim of the more powerful Lords, playing at courtly games of make-believe to confuse others and to further their own goals.

Underneath, there is a system more akin to a fusion of religious orders and corporate structures. It is unclear if the corporate nature of the system is a reflection of the material world, or if the material adopted the structure as a subconscious reflection of the Etheric Realms. Regardless of the origin of the structure, it has led to a two-branch system. On the one branch, called the Right Branch, are more or less permanent positions, according great respect, but proportionally lesser power. At the highest level are the High Cardinals, a group made up of the oldest and most powerful spirits in the Etheric Realms. These are followed by Low Cardinals, Bishops, and the Monsignors. All etheric spirits fall into one of these categories at one level or another, whether they admit it or not. Their specific ranking at any given time is dependent on their relative apparent power.

In the other branch of the tree, called the Left Branch, the ranks are in order: Chief Executors, Upper Managers, Lower Managers, and Technicians. These are elected positions and the spirits imbued with these ranks can have them removed at any time by a majority vote. These elections appear to be on going in the Courts, with promotions and demotions occurring regularly. The higher ones rank in the Right Branch, the more votes one has in Left Branch decisions. In addition, mortals also seem to have a vote in Left Branch elections. In fact, there is a specific subset of the Left Branch, called the Counters or the Accountants, who are responsible for tallying not only spirit, but also mortal votes. However, no spirit knows, or admits knowing, just how the material world influences the voting. Thus, only rare spirits are willing to attract the attention of their opposition to directly influence an uncertain mortal world.

Minions

Monsignors, Technicians, and Accountants make up the lowest tier of Etheric society. Vaguely human in form, they serve higher-ranking spirits when they must, but attempt to keep to themselves as much as possible. They attempt to rise to greater power, using their rare manifestations in material realms to entice mortals into doing them favors. There are simpler elemental beings that act as near-mindless servitors to any who can enslave them.

Into this lower class of elemental beings fall a myriad of earth, glass, and electricity spirits, as well as the lesser spirits generated by nature, technology, and decay. These spirits can be bound into objects or even other beings. Unfortunately, such beings often serve greater spirits who might take offense to having their servants otherwise detained. For example, the elemental spirit of a candle flame likely serves a fire Monsignor who in turn serves a Bishop-Executor. Mistreating the candle-flame spirit might draw the wrath of the Bishop, or an even more powerful spirit whom the Executor serves.

Addendum

For beings as complex as the Umbrood (recall this is your term, not mine), this is an incredibly brief summary. However, I believe it will serve as a first pass. Perhaps as we develop or treatise, we can expand on these thoughts further.

I look forward to your response.

Co. Balt
Lecturer Emeritus
November 18th, 1995

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Correspondent Balt,

Brilliant interpretation. I believe we must be careful with its expression, because such a thing is so radically

different from prior postulates of the Court of Shadows. As you stated, the Umbrood often present alternating faces of singular expression. Perhaps this will prove just another face and in five years will be long forgotten by the Umbra and its denizens. Nevertheless, your example serves to convey the sheer complexity of Umbrood politics that we should likely expand upon it for their edification.

Can you provide further thoughts on the matter?

Xadreque Machado
21 November 1995

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Xadreque Machado,

As usual, I hope that this missive has found you in good health and after as few side-trips as possible. You made some interesting points in your last correspondence. I address some of these in this, my reply.

As I have stated before, it is my belief that Etheric Spirits, or Umbrood as you insist I refer to them, form spontaneously in conjunction with original thoughts of those in the material realms. Despite arguments to the contrary, I believe that original thought is so rare that no matter the vastness of probability space, the birth of new Umbrood is an irregular occurrence at best. This is not to say that I believe that the Umbrood are the creation of the thought, nor that the thought is the creation of the freshly born Umbrood. They are both results of the same underlying process in the Ether. Both evolve in parallel. As thoughts gain strength in the material realms, their associated spirit also gains power and the respect of its peers. As a spirit gains strength, it gains the ability to affect the material realms more effectively, and thus spread support for its associated thought.

It is my opinion that this parallel-processing phenomena explains neatly the existence of the apparently incredibly ancient and incredibly potent Umbrood that seem to be the secret masters of the Umbral Courts. There are some thoughts, some concepts, that are so indelibly ingrained on the subconscious of the inhabitants of the multitude material pockets that the spirits associated with them have transcended normal measurements of power.

At the same time, this theory explains the deceptively powerful Umbrood you describe encountering in you research. With no intention of casting aspersions on your considerable investigative ability, it is a common mistake of naïve academics to assume that their home material pocket is primary material pocket, or even the only material pocket of note. Spirits associated with thoughts that have never taken root in one's home reality might be incredibly powerful indeed, if their associated concepts are widely accepted among other material pockets. Indeed, this explains the continued existence of the so-called Bygones. While some of the "mythic" creatures still have a following in the material pocket we deem our home reality, many more that have been encountered have been long forgotten. And yet these forgotten myths continue to exist in the Umbra. How else might they exist without the belief of at least one material pocket?

I find that time has again slipped away from me. I send this humble note along now, with promises of my responses to your comments on the political evolution of the Courts as soon as my responsibilities allow.

Co. Balt
Lecturer Emeritus
November 23rd, 1995

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Correspondent Balt,

Never had I considered such a possibility. I believe we must explore this further. I eagerly await further extrapolations upon this theory so as to begin experiments of my own.

Also, you mentioned further thoughts on the Courts. Could you provide me with a specific instance that supports your views? Not that I doubt; simply that I wish to ascertain an illustration of the Courts in practice.

Xadreque Machado
25 November 1995

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Xadreque Machado,

As promised, here are my comments on the political evolution of the Courts. Or rather, and more to the point, my comments on how the political fate of a particular Umbrood might evolve.

I take for purposes of example, an Etheric Spirit of my acquaintance. The spirit in question is a trickster of sorts, but seems generally satisfied with the nomenclature "Rheinhund," and thus it is by this name I will refer to it.

When I first encountered the Rheinhund, it was a mere Monsignor (I refer to the terminology I have defined in an earlier enclosure). This was early in my academic career and I must admit, I was easily mislead by prior assumptions. The Rheinhund convinced me that he was an ancient thunder spirit, a representative of the Lodge of the Sky. He led me on a merry chase for the datum I was seeking at the time, and before that encounter was complete, I suspected that he was not as potent as it portrayed itself to be.

The Rheinhund sought me out for our next encounter. Upon finding me, the spirit revealed its true nature as a recently elevated Bishop and apologized for misleading me in our earlier encounter. As I felt I owed the spirit a favor in return for its prior aid, I agreed to assist with the Rheinhund's current quest. Along the way, I was able to gather a significant amount of information regarding Umbral politics. It was with this data I was able to begin developing my theories regarding the political structure I describe as the Right Branch. It wouldn't be until much later that I would discover that the tasks with which I assisted the Rheinhund were part of an attempt to gather prestige within the Left Branch.

Having found an agreeable companion in the Rheinhund, I interacted with the being several more time during the following years. While the spirit attempted to mislead and misinform me during each encounter, every contact provided me with more facts about Umbral politics. I learned much about the volatility of the system during the Rheinhund's brief ascension to the Right rank of Low Cardinal. At the time, I found myself actually involved in what amounted to a minor spiritual war when the Rheinhund pushed his new rank a bit too far. Later, I traveled with the Rheinhund to one of the odder material pockets I have encountered in my travels. My companion claimed we were seeking an Accountant spirit who was responsible for misreporting the Rheinhund's success during his attempt to gain a Management position in the Left Branch. I tend to believe this claim, as the pocket appeared to be filled with row after row of identical beings working identical adding machines while sitting at identical desks.

During my last conversation with the Rheinhund, he claimed to have reached the rank of Upper Manager-Bishop and that he was in charge of distributing a certain class of nightmares culled from the Umbra's mythic horrors. Whether this proves to be a permanent assignment or even true will only be discovered with time.

I hope that this discussion has served to clarify the reasons for my theories. I look forward to hearing your further comments.

Co. Balt
Lecturer Emeritus
December 1st, 1995

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Balt alone did not lead the discussion. I present one of many examples displaying Machados' initiations.

Human Contact With Umbrood

Colleague Balt,

I believe I have something you will find quite interesting. After much analysis of accounts within our own history and those confiscated from your Traditions, I seem to have discovered a pattern involving the interaction of Umbrood with Sleepers and the Awakened. I shall present brief abstracts of a few such occurrences. My preliminary conclusions derived from each abstract follow.

Sleeper Encounter

Tales abound of Sleepers who encounter Umbrood within the realm of earth. Though many are exaggerations of interaction or outright fabrications intended to scare or entertain, a few seem authentic. The problem lies with interpretation, for Sleepers are not the most reliable of witnesses when it comes to encounters with practically any expression of the Awakened universe. Finding a trustworthy

Sleeper account of such interactions becomes problematic, at best. Generally they try to rationalize what they saw as a byproduct of their environment rather than applying what seems to them as heretical and outrageous interpretations. Much is lost through their filter of universal ignorance.

Occasionally this filter is overcome by circumstance, but generally this involves removing the Sleeper's familiar environs. This brings us to the curious example of Archibald Lechtmann, a rail worker in the American Midwest, circa 1932. Popular Sleeper tales regarding his account entail his drunken argument with a mysterious Creole near the docks of Chicago. Tales say that at the height of the argument the man cursed him, and within a day Lechtmann had disappeared with no trace. Sleeper authorities suspected a murder, but could find no trace of Lechtmann or the Creole.

The man in question was actually a Dreamspeaker named "Gloomy" Nate DuChamps, a Master of Spirit. Interviews with his apprentices allow a reconstruction of events: DuChamps hired Lechtmann to retrieve an artifact of what was apparently Egyptian descent from a local museum. Lechtmann did so, but refused to hand it over until he received a much larger payment. The argument grew heated and culminated with DuChamps pronouncing that if Lechtmann wished to retain the artifact, he would do so for all of his days. DuChamps wove Lechtmann to the artifact's Pattern and then unstuck the artifact from the realm of earth, allowing it to return to its rightful home. Lechtmann and the artifact vanished to location unknown.

In 1978, a Hermetic named Cagney Brown became lost in her Umbral travels and found herself within an expression of the Umbral Court that resembled, for the most part, ancient Egypt. Amongst her explorations she discovered Lechtmann in a state of servitude to the court, obviously human in contrast to his more fanciful compatriots. Brown positioned herself near Lechtmann, apparently stationed near a powerful being calling itself Thoth, and gained his trust.

After speaking at length with Lechtmann, she learned that the artifact in question was a small stopper for a flask encrusted with precious metals and gems — the stopper for the Amphora of Knowledge of the Upper and Lower Nile, one of the many casks from which Thoth drank. It fell to Lechtmann to re-stopper the Amphora when Thoth no longer desired to drink from it, as it had for nearly five decades. Brown reported that he seemed rather lonely but happy with his work, for he had grown fond of observing the court's interactions.

When asked why he had transitioned to working for the court, Lechtmann recounted his initial arrival. He reported that the Umbrood "at his station" had initially tasked him with doing so immediately upon his return, and that they treated him as a lost companion who had returned from a long trip to continue his duties. His humanity went unnoticed, and his need for sustenance and sleep was allowed and provided for with little question. He only encountered any resistance when he neglected to perform his duties, and early in his servitude had been lashed within an inch of his life for causing Thoth displeasure. Thoth had not once paid Lechtmann any heed, not even so much as a glance since his arrival; nor had any of the other "gods" or their direct inferiors. Indeed, only the "overseers" and his fellow "slaves" had ever noticed him.

Brown offered to free Lechtmann from his enjoinment with the stopper, but the man refused, stating he would rather die at the courts than return to his old life of backbreaking labor with no foreseeable reward. Brown eventually departed, and it is unknown whether Lechtmann still survives.

Interesting but tangential is Lechtmann's observation of the Court. He swore that at least three different Umbrood had taken the part of Thoth over the course of years, and that while his companions always went by the same name and acted similarly, they were often "physically" different. This would support the idea that Umbrood take on elaborate roles within the context of the recreation of human belief systems, swapping roles as individual Umbrood ranks are gained and lost.

Worthy of note, but my desired correlation becomes more evident within the context of the story that follows.

Enlightened Encounter

An examination of Brown's earlier Umbral forays provides the perspective of a prototypical Awakened's encounters with Umbrood. Her original goal in traveling through the Umbra was to find the creature known as "Maxwell's Demon," and began her search in realms of pure thought. Her initial interactions with the realms' denizens were fruitless, though she did manage communication with the color Blue, amongst others. Her impressions were that the Umbrood within the realms didn't consider her to be anything more than a passing curiosity — she stated that she felt rather simple amongst so many complex thoughts.

Brown made headway after observing the complexities of metaphor that served as political interaction between the Umbrood. Though she was generally ignored, this allowed her to "slip through the cracks" of the realm's social structure, so to speak, and accomplish much with little interference. Embodying or acting through metaphor provoked generally predictable reactions from the Umbrood. Extensive observation allowed Brown the opportunity to plan a broad metaphorical context within which she could compel them to provide an answer. After successfully questing to find Occam's Razor, she used it to slay Schroedinger's Cat, which metaphorically reduced the uncertainty with which the Umbrood regarded her. Within their social structure, such a feat allowed them to provide her with direction in her search for the Demon.

Also tangential is the great care Awakened must enact not to break the social mores of Umbrood. Brown's idea was clever, but did not consider potential consequences. Unfortunately the cer-

tainty she experienced placed uncertainty at an imbalance, and in the realms of pure thought this had an unexpected effect. As Brown left the realm, uncertainty overcorrected in returning to its previous state, causing her to become lost in her search. From there she found herself in the Umbral Courts, per the previous account. Again worthy of note, yet trivial to my point.

Conclusion

There is a rather interesting progression between the accounts, as you no doubt already see. A Sleeper in contact with Umbrood received barely any attention and found himself relegated to the status of the realm's subordinates. When one of the Enlightened encountered Umbrood, she received attention from the realm's denizens but had to observe the same social strictures to which they ascribed. Perhaps enlightenment has something to do with the ease of Umbrood interaction, almost a "social status of the Umbra."

Enclosed please find roughly 800 accounts culled from records I can access. I realize this is entirely too small a data set from which to derive a satisfactory conclusion, but I feel it is a trend worth exploring. I am currently searching through our records for instances which contradict my hypothesis, but I must obfuscate my requests to avoid arousing suspicion regarding my interests. I ask that you provide your own thoughts on the matter and encourage you to "poke holes," as it were. Before I explore any further, I must be certain that I am not attempting to prove a hypothesis that is fundamentally flawed.

Xadreque Machado
7 April 1997

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Xadreque Machado,

Fascinating. What can I say, but I found your comparison of a mystical understanding and awareness to the amount of etheric attention that a willworker draws to herself incredibly fascinating. As a result, I have done some investigation of my own.

While as you say, the small data set I could draw upon is hardly proof, my checking appears to correlate with your observations. In most cases, more enlightened mages do appear to more rapidly attract attention from Umbrood. However, I wonder if we are missing an important fact. Those with greater enlightenment also tend to have a greater understanding of how to properly interact with objects and entities composed of Ether, or should I say, native to the Umbra. Is it possible that those with such understanding subconsciously attract that attention as a side effect of their ability? I think we can agree that Umbra is vulnerable to subconscious manipulation and that such a theory might hold merit as a result.

I pose this question merely to inspire additional thought. I believe quite firmly that your theory is sound, but until we can gather enough data to disprove any alternatives, I believe it is prudent to keep every possible line of thought open.

Sincerely,
Co. Balt
Lecturer Emeritus
April 10th, 1997

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I include more of Balt's writings on these topics. He prattles on about some form of distinction within his "Umbra."

Three Worlds

My Esteemed Colleague,

In mentally reviewing my last missive to you, feel that I may have been somewhat misleading in my portrayal of the spirit etheric. While the Rheinhund, in my experience could be mischievous and intentionally misleading, he was for the most part reasonably comprehensible.

Unfortunately, this seems not to be the case with most etheric spirits. Indeed, most spirits that I have encountered, or whom I have heard described first hand, are confusing in the extreme. Any attempt to categorize them or their behavior according to human norms is a chancy proposition at best. I think, perhaps, the term frustrating is the one best applied to the description of the so-called Umbrood.

Consider the two situations in which a mage might encounter one of the spirits. The first is in the etheric realm proper. In some places, the spirits are as thick as the streets of modern Chicago or Hong Kong. They bustle about, attending to the various tasks, paying little to no attention to what occurs around them. And yet, even with this much activity, a mage confident in his ability to attract onlookers in any setting can find himself ignored and pushed out of the way like a stray dog or piece of refuse. Even if he is able to command respect, he may still find his goals frustrated by the seemingly pointless activities of the spirits with whom he attempting communication. Worse yet, while in the etheric realms, many of his mystic abilities may be useless to him, forcing him to relearn how to influence the reality around him before he can interact on an equal footing with the native spirits.

On the other hand, the mage may be lucky (unlucky?) enough to encounter a spirit in his native material realm. In this case, such a spirit is most likely to be quite powerful. After all, the being was able to make the transit between the realms. When dealing with such a creature, all but the most powerful mages best step lightly until they are certain of their comparative power levels. Even once a mage is certain he can overpower a particular spirit, he must keep his wits about him. Spirits, even materialized ones, are not affected by magic in the same way as mortals. In addition, they are likely to have allies or superiors who would look poorly on their mistreatment at the hands of a mage.

Assuming all other factors are accounted for, spirits can still be a source of constant frustration to a mage as the result of misinterpretation (active or otherwise) of the communication. Some spirits like nothing better than to find a way to twist everything a mage says. Such spirits may do this out of malevolence, but most do it purely to drive the willworker to frustration.

I hope that this representation of the etheric spirits clarifies matters somewhat. As always, I look forward to your thoughts.

Co. Balt
Lecturer Emeritus
January 8th, 1996

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Correspondent Balt,

Certainly so. Simply because "belief" is attached to the existence of the Umbrood, it is entirely possible to encounter the rather problematic occurrence of a spirit presenting itself as something that it isn't. By expecting a realm of ghosts, the Umbrood will often present themselves as something rather ghostly. This is rarely a conscious matter. To say aloud "I only see spirits consisting of gold" does not make all Umbrood within one's gaze become gold. Though certainly one's subconscious affects encounters with Umbrood, one will does not control their expression.

Simply put, expectation alone does not dictate the state of Umbrood encountered. Certainly subjectivity allows a filter of comprehension between our primitive minds and the sheer, raw primacy of the organized chaos that is the Umbra, but does not itself control such force. Such wavering particulars are part of why the Umbra and its denizens are so difficult to truly comprehend.

Forgive my interruption and please continue with your assessment. I shall return to this later.

Xadreque Machado
17 January 1996

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Xadreque Machado,

While I have been awaiting your reply to my latest missive, I have been considering the nature of the so-called three worlds further. In order to facilitate the completion of our tome, I have decided to share my thoughts with you now so that we may discuss them further at your leisure.

Previously, the Umbra has been divided conceptually into worlds. The first of note is the High Umbra, a realm called the world of ideas. The second is the Middle Umbra that is a spiritual reflection of the material realms. The third has been called the Low Umbra and is also known as the world of the dead. As I have indicated before, I belief that these distinctions only begin to scratch the surface.

Those mages who have traveled to the High Umbra have found a place populated by the ultimate idealization of ideas. The landscape is described as abstract and it is known that the Universal Subconscious can be accessed here in the form of a well. The Middle Umbral is regularly visited by lycanthropes of all sorts. It is also a reflection of the material realms as they might have been. Finally, the Low Umbra is home to restless spirits who believe they are dead mortals. Restless and vengeful, these spirits torment visitors to their realms and no small number of mages has been driven mad here.

Despite the variety displayed by these categorizations, I believe the true research potential lies in the places between. What is the nature of the spirits who dwell where the High and Middle Umbra meet? Such beings, while still representations of concepts, now correspond to more concrete ideas. Rather than meeting the color red, as one might in the High Umbra, a mage is more likely to communicate with the spirit of the sunset and thus encounter a red he has experienced personally.

Where High Umbra meets Low (and yes, I believe this can and does occur), the concept spirits are those created when ideas are destroyed. This realm is the home of stories never written and inventions discarded before they were given life. This may be the place from whence some beings considered Bygones emerge. Worse yet, this may also be the home to the spirits of madness that plague those called Maurauders.

What about the place where the Middle Umbra meets the Low Umbra? I suspect, from the research I have done on those who interact with ghosts, that such a realm has already been encountered. It appears that in order to interact with the living, the ghosts move into a middle place, a place neither truly the Low Umbra, but also not the material. The descriptions of this place are much like those of the Middle Umbra, except that being a place of life and possibility, it is a place which represents how the material might be if everything were dead. I have no confirming evidence, but I suspect the rumors of ghosts of fictional characters result from spirits originating in this conjunction.

Though the specifics escape my ancient brain at this time, I suspect that there are other etheric intersections that can described and discovered. I hope you find these thoughts provocative and worth additional research. I look forward to reading your reply.

Co. Balt
Lecturer Emeritus
January 23rd, 1996

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As time passed, Balt and Machado entered more fantastical territories that, were the situation not so grave, would be considered humorous. I have taken the liberty of providing such examples below. Some mention prior topics discussed in other letters. Please refer to the complete exchange of letters between Balt and Machado for further comprehension.

Travel Between Realms

Xadreque Machado,

Certain rumors have come to my attention that I wish to share with you at this time.

While talking to a trusted student recently, I revealed that I was pondering publishing a tome discussing the nature of etheric spirits. His eyes brightened, and he described an encounter that had been described to him by one of his colleagues. Now normally, I would not give such 'twice-told' tales much credence, however the student has proven to be unusually perceptive in the past and the story he told matched rumors that had been shared with me by my mentor when I was the student's age. Regardless, the description is intriguing enough that it may serve as a valuable anecdote in our book.

According to my student, his colleague encountered a particularly alert spirit while traveling through the so-called Low Umbra. The mage in question attempted to ignore the spirit, as it was unrelated to his task, but the "ghost" was particularly persistent. I use the word ghost, as this was the word that was used when the tale was relayed to me. By description the spirit held all the hallmarks of a fictional spirit; it bore heavy chains and was hued in muted tones. The nature of the task was not revealed to me, but apparently it was unsuccessful, as the willworker decided to investigate the persistent spirit.

Once the spirit was certain it had attracted attention, it proceeded "upward" through the Umbra. The now-curious mage followed at a respectful distance. He was amazed, as the spirit seemed to change as it moved from the Low Umbra to the Middle Umbra. Now you might expect, as I did, that the spirit took on a more lively appearance upon entering the higher realm. This is what occurred, but only in part. Not only did the spirit reflect more life, it shifted its physical form. What once appeared to be a fictional specter, now slowly took on the form of a four-armed plush teddy bear. I pause in the telling as I paused when it was told to me. That description is as accurate as the observer could portray. As my student said, "Who would confuse a detail like that?"

While a ghost, the spirit seemed driven toward a particular goal. Once the spirit had completed its transition into the Middle Umbra it seemed to forget its task, content instead to frolic in its new surroundings. Even more curious than before, the mage continued observe the playful ursine. As it drifted toward various material pockets, its form shifted subtly, sometimes changing color and other times growing or losing a tail or other extremity. According to my student, the observation continued while the mutating spirit drifted even further 'upward' through the Umbra. This is where my tale ends. The observer told my student that he was so disturbed by the transformation that seemed to be occurring as the spirit entered the High Umbra that he neither cared to observe further nor to describe his fears.

I appreciate your thoughts on this tale. I am assured that it is not the result of foreign substances.

Co. Balt
Lecturer Emeritus
August 10th, 1997

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Correspondent Balt,

Breaking for a minute from our earlier analysis, I desire to share my own thoughts on travel between the realms. The tale of your student is rather fantastical in nature, but I do not immediately doubt its veracity. Even if the events consist of an exaggeration, the "grain of truth" at the core is self-evident. However, I admit what most surprised me about the student's tale was the relative ease with which the Enlightened observer and the Umbrood traveled between the "Umbral Realms."

That such travel is possible I do not deny, for I interact with many who undertake such dangers constantly. You yourself must know of the dangers that rear their heads when traveling between realms. Local politics abound, even within the context of the Umbra, and to cross boundaries requires inasmuch care as entering borders of foreign nations. With your knowledge of the Courts, you must be well aware of the local "laws" that each expression can take. Breaking these laws can lead to severe punishment as harsh as (or worse than) death itself. Numbering amongst other causes of danger is that faced from the Umbrood themselves. A traveler can just as easily discover himself feared, hunted or sought as dinner by any or all of a realm's denizens.

Even worse, certain Realms are themselves dangerous to any travelers, either indirectly or intentionally. One realm I've read about doesn't contain the concept of "sight." This loss of sense is jarring to many and often leads to wasting death for those who cannot find their way out. Some are dangerous by extension of their apparent benefits, such as realms which remove all sense of hunger from all within. One can waste away of hunger and never realize it, for the urge to eat never presents itself. Others, typically products of the Fringe, encompass entire elemental aspects, such as fire, pressure, atrocity or decay. Simply arriving without appropriate protection can lead to the death of a traveler, through methods most painful and foul.

Perhaps the subject of your student's story downplayed the danger of such travel. Or, it could be that the traveler was of such capability that a desire to follow the ghost was of greater importance than anything else. The single-minded pursuit possibly exuded waves of unimportance to all other Umbrood encountered, and with a great dose of luck (and perhaps the power to maintain this state of mind) there was little interference.

Xadreque Machado
13 August 1997

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Xadreque Machado,

It was good to hear from you so promptly. Your thoughts on travel in the Umbra continue to fascinate me and I found myself awaiting your further thoughts most eagerly. Needless to say, your thoughts did not disappoint.

Most definitely, it is nearly prohibitively dangerous for a being of low enlightenment to travel in the Umbra, especially without an escort of sufficient power. I like to compare it to thrusting an infant into the middle of a New York City street during rush hour. The child might survive unharmed, but he would most likely to be squished by the unheeding masses and just as rapidly forgotten.

Similarly, a highly enlightened mage is like a wealthy man attempting to move through a crowd of beggars with neither disguise nor bodyguard. He will likely navigate the masses eventually, but it will likely cost him most, if not all, of his ready resources and take him significantly longer than a more common man.

In fact, it strikes me that urban willworkers might experience the Umbra in just such paradigms. You have made a valid point about the affect a mage's desires have upon his perceptions of the spirit realms.

Again, I mostly wanted to thank you for your clever insights. I look forward to your further thoughts.

Co. Balt
Lecturer Emeritus
August 21st, 1997

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Correspondent Balt,

To note, insignificance can provoke just as much misery as becoming the focus of attention. Should

And also, going back to tie in that you "see what you want to" – the importance is often in your own mind.)

Xadreque Machado
29 August 1997

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Xadreque Machado,

You pose a number of interesting points with regards to traveling to the etheric realms. I wished to make a few brief comments in response.

Certainly, travel to the Umbra (it still chafes to use this term, but I am attempting to be flexible) is difficult at best. Though I know you did not intend to underemphasize the fact, merely making such a trip requires a significant amount of enlightenment and training. It is not a trip for a young novice. And it is fortunate that it is not, for as you point out there are many dangers waiting for the unwary.

In any culture, it is important for newcomers to adapt quickly in order to thrive. As you point out, this is incredibly difficult, especially in Umbral cultures that often appear to be constantly changing. Worse yet, a lack of cultural under-

standing can quickly lead to offense. This can be inconvenient enough in a material realm, but to offend the unknown in the spiritual realms can rapidly result in a war being called down on a mage's head. I think we should stress the importance of thorough reconnaissance before any trip through the so-called Gauntlet, and that the longer the intended trip, the more detailed the prior research.

I recall an event from my own life, very early in my career, when I mistook a vegetable-based etheric for a humble tree. While I settled down for a nap, the etheric spirit mistook *me* for a meaty snack. Fortunately, I was able to extricate myself from the predicament without harming the spirit and without drawing down the wrath of any of its colleagues. In fact, in the end, I formed a solid working relationship with the spirit that lasted until the spirit found it important to take spiritual root and think for several centuries. I look forward to his thoughts upon his awakening.

But I digress. Your work continues to fascinate me and inspire further research. I look forward to any further thoughts you have on this matter.

Sincerely,
Co. Balt
Lecturer Emeritus
August 31st, 1997

Magic and the Umbrood

Xadreque Machado,

As fascinating as our continuing discourse has been, it has struck me of late that we are ignoring an issue that is critical to all willworkers. As a result, I wish to address how magic, to use a blanket term, works in relation to natives of the Umbra.

Quite simply, it does not always work the way a willworker might hope. Superficially, each of the elements of magic appears to work as expected. Correspondence effects can still connect to distance points of space. Entropic effects can still predict and degrade patterns. Life effects can still be used to heal the mage after combat. If unopposed, a willworker may never realize, however, that things can work just a bit differently in the Umbra.

For one thing, outside of material realms in the Umbra, matter in the spirit worlds is not the same as most mages are used to manipulating. Problems resulting from this are easily circumvented, if the mage is patient and takes the extra time to analyze any potential target material. Similarly, as we have discussed before, time itself does not always behave as expected, especially at the far fringes of the Umbra. This can provide difficulties to mages used to manipulating the so-called fourth dimension. They may disbelieve their temporal perceptions or may find their intended effects expanded or contracted unexpectedly.

Such annoyances, however, are only minor when one considers how the native sentients react with mystic effects. First of all, there are a significant number of Umbrood who can detect the manipulation of quintessence and who, more importantly, resent quintessence being drained away from regions they consider their personal demesne.

An Umbrood potent enough to feel it merits a domain is likely to be talented enough to maintain its hold. A willworker who attempts to channel essence or fuel a pattern may find the very quintessence he is attempting to control being drained away from him, and then some. More directly, a confident mage may attempt to create fireballs worthy of fiction in the relatively paradox-free Umbra. Such effects are indeed easily channeled, however, the mage may discover that Umbral opponents have ways to counteract them. More than one ill-prepared mage has been surprised as an apparently sluggish spirit displays incredible feats of speed to avoid magical effects.

Fortunately, the prepared willworker has recourse when attempting to use magic against the Umbrood. Mastery of spiritual magics allows the mage to directly affect the ether that makes up the beings and environment around them. Being creatures of spirit, Umbrood have little protection against such magic except their own natural defenses.

Further, a true master of spiritual magic can shape the environment to re-create nearly any effect that can be generated in the material realms using non-spiritual masteries. These effects, however, cannot be easily avoided. Consider the example above, a mage forming a ball of flame from the stuff of spirit can catch even the swiftest spirit flat-footed. Using spiritual magic, manipulating reality becomes a battle of wills, and most commonly encountered spirits are no match for any willworker able to travel to the Umbra under their own power.

Obviously, the examples I discuss here are just that. Other permutations are possible, and nearly any of the described difficulties can be applied to nearly any mastery of magic. I look forward to any thoughts you have.

Co. Balt
Lecturer Emeritus
May 7th, 1998

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Correspondent Balt,

Turnabout is fair play, it would seem. I chafe at your use of the term "magic" as much as you do of my views on Ether. Thankfully we understand the core of the concept at hand and agree to interpret the root notion, in both cases. What our organizations could accomplish together if only they would set their differences aside such as we have done! An awful shame that centuries of opposition will forever prevent this from happening.

Forgive my rambling. The topic at hand is the affectation of Umbrood by the Enlightened, or "mages" as you refer to them. I cannot offer perspective that you do not already hold in regards to your own Traditions, though perhaps if I

delve briefly into Technocratic experience I can provide you with new thoughts.

For a variety of reasons, my own Convention has traditionally avoided any contact with what we refer to as Dimensional Science. I maintain we do so because we simply weren't adept at its manipulation. As old as I am, I preserve many examples of the sour grapes this Convention left dangling from the vine. Consequently, most modern data I must cull from other Conventions, particularly the Void Engineers.

The Union almost unilaterally refers to Umbrood as "aliens" or "extra-dimensional threats." Keeping in mind how belief affects interaction with Umbrood, the encounters are usually much of what you would expect. We meet these beings with hostility and find it returned, with standing orders to "subjugate in order to prevent subjugation." Enlightened Science in relation to Umbrood works much along the lines as your "magics." Often more unreliable methods function with little trouble, chalked up by Union theorists as "extra-dimensional properties." Certain techniques work more effectively as others against various "alien threats."

Most potent are techniques and devices operating using the principles of Dimensional Science, and skilled Dimensional Scientists are unto gods when within their element. Still, no matter how far we advance technologically, the Umbrood seem to be capable of evolving to meet our innovation. Rarely do we gain significant breakthroughs, which is likely why most of the Union wishes to brush Dimensional Science beneath a rug. So much effort for such little gain causes hard feelings to develop.

I hope this provokes many thoughts.

Xadreque Machado
18 May 1998

Free Spirits

Correspondent Balt,

In looking through old notes, I recalled an interesting topic I delegated for later consideration. Namely, the peculiarity of Umbrood that can cross various Umbral boundaries — "free spirits," as it were. No doubt you are familiar with this phenomena, in which an Umbrood seems to travel or express influence beyond the boundaries to which they are generally thought to be bound. I submit that this phenomena often encounters flagrant misinterpretation of Umbral metaphysics, but that under certain circumstances such an incident can come to pass.

To provide an analogy, this Tapestry that your organization's texts keep mentioning provides a peculiar clarity to the issue. If you posit that everything interrelates, that every "pattern" is in some way connected to other "patterns," themselves "weaving together" a complete whole, then you may think of the "free spirits" as snarls in the tapestry. They are loose threads that, while indeed attached to a specific anchor point, can still range far and wide within a limited vicinity, encountering other threads that they would normally never touch. Perhaps I misconstrue the usage as provided by your Traditions, so I ask you correct any error at the root of the analogy.

Oddly, Umbrood that exude the least influence seem to have the greatest freedom in this regard. Accounts available to me present an exhaustive number of relevant tales involving Umbrood I would classify as subordinates or majordomos. Only rarely do sovereigns exhibit these tendencies, and I have yet to uncover anything indicating such behavior by divinities or their avatars.

Often the perception of "no boundaries" is incorrect. The boundaries simply change. Rarely can an Umbrood go anywhere it wishes. Every Umbrood I have had occasion to encounter is tied to its realm, its master and a certain general concept. Occasionally the master is itself a concept, providing a rather interesting twist to perceptible boundaries.

My theories on why this occurs follow. Do not consider this list all-inclusive.

- Umbrood caught in the destabilization of a whole realm to which they are attached can sometimes escape before its complete decay. Often these Umbrood devote themselves to seeking out another realm amenable to their existence, but can only travel through realms affected by the Umbrood's divinity. On a much smaller scale, Umbrood that lose their immediate superiors and have no clear manner of contacting the senior to their superior can undergo such detachment. In all cases I perused, the Umbrood tended toward listless wandering through realms. Most other Umbrood ignored them, but with no direct patron for protection these "free spirits" could seek no recourse should they be mistreated or destroyed.
- Umbrood who experience a reattachment or divergence to what I call their "hierarchical anchor" can move through realms that normally won't permit their presence. This anchor encompasses the spirit's core dedication, defining it within the "Umbral hierarchy." Warring Umbrood often attempt to fasten the opposition's minions to their own will, altering the anchor until it belongs to them. Such tactics lead to a temporary divergence in the anchor, at which point the Umbrood can travel through realms influenced by "both" masters. Any attempt to do this on a permanent basis is eminently difficult, for wresting away an already controlled anchor point is difficult even for Umbrood. Incidentally, tales of angry Umbrood bound to an Enlightened's will seem to support this theory. This divergence of the anchor point is often easily detectable by the Umbrood and provokes hostility. However, the act of bargaining defers to an Umbrood's hierarchical position, often avoiding enmity in return for service. Though binding is indeed quicker than bargaining, it can make lasting enemies amongst Umbrood.

• In rare cases, Umbrood which convey direct authority to a minion can detach the minions from their realms. Such an instance is not taken lightly, for to provide a minion with such grand sway yet retain no direct control upon it can lead to treachery. Often the minion gains the ability to re-attach its anchor to a specific concept, realm or person. It often must restrict its movement through areas controlled by its divinity, though some Umbrood have been known to eclipse even these boundaries. Outside of the superior's influence, loyalty can only be maintained through fear or promised reward, though occasionally Umbrood minions are completely reliable. Rarely does the minion remain unattached for long, as all Umbrood seem to need an anchor. Perhaps this accounts for Umbrood that enter the realm of earth?

There are perhaps more ways for spirits to grow free, but they are unknown to me at this time. Do you have thoughts on this matter?

Xadreque Machado
29 March 1999

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Xadreque Machado,

I am pleased with the progress we are making on this project. We seem to be developing a solid description of the Umbral realms and their natives. And yet, every time I sense the end is in the wind, you surprise me with one of your astute observations.

Free spirits. Naturally there are beings that can escape their metaphysical lots. Such a clear observation, and yet one we have managed to miss thus far. We have observed that certain ghosts can pierce the shroud of the lower Umbra to visit our world. Story after story in mundane myth describe spirits trapped and released from material prisons. I am humbled that I did not think of your explanation myself.

However, I have nothing more to add. Thank you for this important catch.

Co. Balt
Lecturer Emeritus
April 4th, 1999

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As you can see, their correspondence was quite prolific. The variety of subjects they cover reads like a list of studies disproved or forbidden by our Construct. Fortunately their communication came to a halt before any lasting damage could be done. I include their last letters here for your perusal.

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Final Communications

Xadreque Machado,

I am most concerned about recent omens concerning imminent events in the spiritual realms. Until these… for lack of a better world… storms calm, I propose that we dispense with further active research. Surely we have sufficient material to complete our treatise without risking sojourns into the chaos beyond.

I await your reply.

Co. Balt
Lecturer Emeritus
July 3rd, 1999

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Friend Balt,

I pray that you receive this in time. A desperate situation has arisen in the province of "Bangladesh." I am still privy to matters of leadership, and ours is currently in a state that can only be described as panic. As of this moment, there is much suspicion that your organization is responsible for provoking the situation. The current solution is a nuclear one and will be deployed in two hours time, if authorized. Contingencies in our high-level doctrine designate an immediate escalation of the Pogrom directly following a nuclear scenario. This "final eradication" policy will be distributed to all earthside Constructs within twenty-four hours of detonation.

Please heed my words and leave immediately. Your location is known to a local Construct and you are considered the primary threat in the region. Your opposition is not something you can overcome. Go now, where they cannot follow.

I will rendezvous with you on this side of the veil, at the location we once discussed. I shall wait three days before moving on. Godspeed.

—Xadreque
4 July 1999

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Machado's advice was indeed prescient. Control dispatched a team of then-current HIT Marks immediately when we encountered the onset of the Dimensional Anomaly. They arrived to find Balt's center of operations already dismantled, much of his equipment destroyed and little indication of his whereabouts. Only careful application of Enlightened Techniques allowed for the retrieval of the Balt encryption from a broken computer. However, Machado's final letter suggests some incongruity with available information:

• Machado mentioned an escalation of the Pogrom, implying that Balt would be the first to feel the brunt of our Construct's might. At first I suspected this coincided with the HIT Mark team's assault, yet remained unaware of any general increase in Pogrom goals and practices in Quarter-3 of 1999. Rather, the Construct has all but suspended Pogrom-related activity since the Dimensional Anomaly! I explored further and discovered an internal directive from 1997 warranting Balt's capture and containment immediately upon the discovery of any major dimensional irregularities within this area. It seems Admin suspected he

was conducting experiments of a dimensional nature and took steps to compensate. The HIT Mark assault, therefore, was superfluous to the contents of Machado's letter. Does this indicate that Union leadership never ordered an escalation, or perhaps that they were unable to do so before the Anomaly cut off all communication? Did they truly intend to step up the Pogrom? Should we do so, or consider this faulty information?

- Our records indicate that Balt's danger lies with his thorough understanding of dimensional sciences and the very fabric of time itself. Assembled profiles suggest he operates under the assumption that temporal matters are of great relevance, with a strong variation on the predestination of events serving as the basis for his experiments. It was through this reliance on the chronological pseudo-determination that the Construct hoped to induce his capture. The encryption provided by Machado in 1995, at that point the cutting edge of our technology, served to keep their correspondence secure. He provided Balt with better decryption as their association progressed. Strangely, Balt did not update the encryption techniques. Had he done so with the tools provided in Machado's May 1999 missive, the decryption would not have completed until approximately 2025. Keeping Balt's viewpoint in mind, as well as his seeming detection, is it feasible to suspect that Balt left this for us to find? If so, why now? Why does he feel our knowledge of this correspondence will be known two years hence? What does this set in motion? Alternatively, was Balt simply lazy when it came to the updating of technologies? Did he suspect Machado's complicity in some sort of trap, and refuse to use technologies he didn't fully comprehend?

- My brief investigation of Machado's identity within our Construct's archives indicates that one Xadreque Machado figures prominently within our Convention's history, though specific mention of exactly what he did to deserve such attention remains beyond my clearance level. His last known whereabouts are somewhere known as "Autocthonia." Is this actually Xadreque Machado, or somebody who poses as him? Why would such an important figure in our past blatantly defy our policies? If it was indeed Machado, could he have actually been attempting to ensnare Balt in a trap that fell apart when the Dimensional Anomaly hit?

- The present location of both authors is unknown. As previously mentioned, Machado's last known location is Autocthonia. It remains highly doubtful that he could have evaded our Convention's pursuit if he attempted to flee, and current projections indicate a minimal chance that he ever made the implied rendezvous. However, too many variables remain for absolute certainty. In regards to Balt, the HIT Mark team reported that some of Balt's destroyed equipment bore trace elements related to dimensional permutation. The question remains whether or not he managed to escape prior to the Dimensional Anomaly. If so, he likely remains trapped beyond the dimensional barrier. If not — well, we can only hope "if not," for this would indicate Balt's demise and a thorn pulled from of the side of the Union. It is highly doubtful that Balt's dimensional travel was a ruse intended to distract us from his remainder on this side of the barrier, but the possibility must be broached.

- I activated top-level search agents as per the Remote Authority Addendum 8.4 of 1999, subsection 1/256.12f. I ordered them to infiltrate all known Sleeper publishing outlets and determine whether Balt or Machado actually made good on their threat of dissemination to a Sleeper audience. The question remains whether or not they released anything before the Dimensional Anomaly. Perhaps a publisher has more of their notes or a preliminary draft of their work. I slaved all output towards your bulk account. Expect results within the week.

You understand now why I felt this should be brought to your attention immediately. Perhaps we make the discovery two years after the events that transpired, but the necessity of acting upon such a discovery as immediately as possible can't be underscored sufficiently. I haven't yet shared the Decryption or its contents with any others, for its sensitive nature understandably precludes discussion. I shall await your recommendation before proceeding.

Finally, you'll find the unedited entirety of the Balt Decryption attached to this e-mail, containing all letters sent to Machado and received by Balt, as well as any relevant material passed electronically between the two for your further perusal.

It is an honor to serve,

—Armature Harlan Gandt

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Include File="balt decryption.tdc"

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Content-Transfer-Encoding: quoted-printable

Content-Disposition: attachment; filename="balt decryption.tdc"

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From: "Lisa Chatham" <lchatham@admin.cgv.itx>
To: "Harlan Gandt" <hgandt@recovery.cgv.itx>
Subject: Re: URGENT: Machado Decryption, FYEO
Date: Fri, 17 Aug 2001 22:26:10 -0600

• • • • •

Armature Gandt,

Excellent work. Your two years of service in this matter have not gone by unnoticed. Your tireless devotion and compartmentalization of such a sensitive matter should serve as an example to this Construct. It is unfortunate that this will never be the case.

Report to Personnel at 2300 hours for psychological excision and subsequent intellectual reformation. Be assured that your work here has granted you a promotion and transfer to a new life. All will be provided for you, as it always has. Trust in swift conversion.

Goodbye,

—Comptroller Lisa Chatham

• • • • •

From: "Harlan Gandt" <hgandt@recovery.cgv.itx>
To: "Lisa Chatham" <lchatham@admin.cgv.itx>
Subject: Re: Re: URGENT: Machado Decryption, FYEO
Date: Fri, 17 Aug 2001 22:31:41 -0600

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Comptroller Chatham,

Thank you, ma'am. I must express my gratitude for your faith in my abilities. I look forward to the opportunities my new career is certain to bring. I will report to Personnel immediately.

It was an honor to serve,

—Armature Harlan Gandt

• • • • •

From: "Lisa Chatham" <lchatham@admin.cgv.itx>
To: "Jason Wells" <jwells@custodial.cgv.itx>
Subject: Possible spill
Date: Fri, 17 Aug 2001 22:32:39 –0600

• • • • •

Jason,

Get a team down to Gandt's office immediately. Standard cleaning procedure, subsequent to his departure. Make it look like a robbery.

Gandt currently exhibits compliance. Have him tailed to Personnel. If he bolts, dispose of him.

—Comptroller Lisa Chatham

Umbrood Systems

Umbrood have almost infinite possibility in a **Mage** chronicle. They might appear as allies, enemies, or just weird side bits. They might be the focus of an entire story arc, of a single session, or just provide color along the way. We provide some suggestions here, but always remember that Umbrood are incomprehensible. If the Storyteller decides that Umbrood behave in a certain manner, that is entirely her prerogative. In fact, even the behavior of individual Umbrood may seem to be inconsistent from session to session. Even to the mightiest of willworkers, the true drive of these spirits can be enigma wrapped inside a riddle.

An encounter with one of the Umbrood can often seem very dreamlike. In their native realm, many Umbrood can prove the equal to willworkers in manipulating their surroundings. Even if they are not, they are often personally mutable, changing their color, size, number of limbs or complete appearance during the course of a simple conversation. Mages who encounter this phenomena for the first time can be easily distracted, searching for a reason for the alterations when none exists. Rumors exist of a class of Umbrood who are intimately tied the nature of the Umbra around them. If the tales are to be believed, these beings change in form and personality are they move from region of the Umbra to another.

Umbrood As Messengers

Perhaps one of the easiest ways to incorporate Umbrood into a Mage chronicle is as messengers. Given their unique abilities they prove to be useful couriers, a sort of spiritual carrier pigeon. Unless special precautions are taken to prevent it, Umbrood can deliver messages quickly and discreetly. If you plan to use Umbrood in your chronicle in this way, the question becomes who is the message from? And for whom is it intended?

One obvious choice is to have the player characters receive a message from a mysterious (or not so mysterious) ally delivered by spirit. A variation on classic adventure-starting scenarios used in almost any genre, the spiritual twist can give the old idea new life. A variation of this idea is a threat from an enemy mage or powerful, and angry, Umbrood Lord delivered by a fearful spirit. Similarly, if your players are sharp (or well-read) they may choose to use courier-Umbrood to send each other messages and to coordinate wide-spread efforts.

Perhaps a more interesting approach would be to have the players to accidentally receive a message not meant for them. They might not even realize that such a message is there to receive. Why does that crow spirit insist on knocking on the door of the PCs' chancel?

All of these ideas imply a sort of U-mail system existing in the Umbra — hordes of Umbrood scurrying back and forth at top speed delivering messages for mages and other influential beings. If this is the case, is there an Umbral equivalent of packet-sniffing? Is someone or something checking all the messages for key words or phrases? Are there critical 'nodes' in the Umbra that can be destroyed or clogged to delay or prevent U-mail transmission? Perhaps a Technocratic view of the Umbra realms isn't so far off after all.

As Allies

Umbrood can affect reality in ways that others simply can't. On earth alone, they aren't constrained by the Avatar Storm, security checkpoints or even most walls, for that matter. Beyond more earthly considerations, gaining Umbrood allies can prove invaluable to any Mage cabal traveling through the Umbra. Umbrood can serve as guides, serve as diplomat in realms otherwise unfriendly to the cabal, provide much needed explanation to strange surroundings and introduce the cabal to their patrons, amongst other things.

Often Storyteller character allies travel with the cabal. It's not unreasonable that Umbrood allies could do so as well. Simply remember that Umbrood are, by definition, alien to human conception. Storytellers who plan on chronicles involving extended interaction with an Umbrood ally should decide exactly how much she wants to play up that aspect. Some people would prefer there was absolutely no anthropomorphizing of spirits. If you can pull that off, by all means do so. However, most Storytellers (and more importantly, most players) have difficulty conceiving of a Storyteller character that has absolutely no connection to anything human. Often the best idea is to find a good balance between the two, presenting a character that has some distinctly human aspects but others that simply don't conform to a human ideal.

The tone of your chronicle should help determine the style of Umbrood interaction you're hoping for. Lighter chronicles that stress humorous elements and fluid play should go easy on the metaphysics. Keep things exaggerated and moving with all the weighty consistency of the average Saturday morning cartoon. Play up the caricature aspect if you'd like, characterizing all the denizens of a particular spirit realm with a particular facial expression or style of speech. Try not to take things too seriously or present Umbrood as godawfuly self-important. Or if you do, exaggerate it to the point of absurdity.

Chronicles that tend more towards the grim and gritty, long-term consistency or "realism" should specifically avoid this style of play. Certainly there's room for the occasional blithe aside, but expressing the sheer incomprehensibility of Umbrood should be the point of focus. It's a good idea for the Storyteller to spend at least some amount of time thinking about how the Umbrood will operate in her chronicle, perhaps delving into the cosmology as it relates to the ally. Figure out who/what the Umbrood serves, any significant enemies (typically those that oppose the Umbrood's master), from what realm it originates and exactly why it considers the cabal allies.

Cabals can gain Umbrood allies through a variety of means. Often performing some sort of service and exceeding all expectations can impress a self-aware Umbrood. Extricating an Umbrood from a particularly difficult situation often

goes far towards getting into a spirit's good graces. Performing rituals common amongst most Traditions and some Conventions is a classic method, exchanging Quintessence and favors for alliance. Whatever the case, it generally involves some form of sacrifice on the part of the characters, whether literal or figurative.

Remember, Umbrood are not beholden to mages. While some might have specific pacts or histories of dealing with the Awakened, most don't have *any* obligation to care about mere humans. Approaching an Umbrood entity with Spirit magic is one way to go about things — but it's also a quick way to crash and burn. Eventually a mage will run afoul of something he can't control, and the Umbrood will show their annoyance with the pathetic mortal who oversteps his station.

Similarly, a mage might offer to perform services and give sacrifices for an Umbrood being. However, the Umbrood are not necessarily beholden to agree to or comply with such deals! A mage might jump through many hoops to gain an Umbrood ally, only to discover that he's been foully used. A mage can't always tell immediately if a spirit is forthright and inclined toward honoring deals. Sure, some Umbrood may do so — beings representing concepts like truth and sacrifice. Unless the mage is painstakingly familiar with different Umbrood, though, there's no sure-fire way to discriminate these from the other sorts — especially if an Umbrood inclined toward deception passes itself off as such a being.

The best way to achieve a level of reliable communication with Umbrood, then, is to establish oneself as a player on their field. This means dealing with a powerful Umbrood creature that has the desire to have a magely ally without alienating the mage in question. The Umbrood must be convinced not only that it's worthwhile to have the mage around, but to back up the mage's authority. That way, the mage can cut deals with other spirits and then, if they don't uphold their part of the bargain, he has a friend in the courts to back up his clout. In this case, too, the mage isn't just going around enforcing his will on spirits; he's working within their system. But, on the other hand, there will always be spirits outside of his jurisdiction, unless he makes pacts with multiple Umbrood. Eventually, mages who do this find themselves in webs of mutual service to many and varied Umbrood. The mage can call on these creatures for aid, but also must give something in return....

As Enemies

While sometimes Umbrood can prove to be powerful allies, just as often, they can be lethal enemies. These spirits take their power struggles and political games very seriously. The mage who interferes with the plans of an Umbrood, consciously or unconsciously, can find that the wrath of a spirit is no joking matter. On the other hand, no small number of willworkers have found themselves made pawns

or targets of Umbrood, for no other reason than they attracted attention to themselves. In some senses, this latter case is a more difficult problem to solve. In the former situation, spirits can be appeased with gifts or quests. In the latter, mages often must hope that the spirits grow bored with them quickly.

In their efforts to subtly adjust reality, mages run the constant risk of interfering with the plans of one or more influential Umbood. Depending on the relative power and personality of the spirit in question and on the perceived importance of the foiled plot, any number of responses are possible. At the simplest, a low-rank Umbrood may have to settle for minor annoyances, such as a word-of-mouth negative public-relations chronicle, against the mage. Note that such activities can be very satisfactory to the offended spirit. A mage might find himself deserted by former Umbrood allies at inopportune times. Umbrood a willworker had never encountered might actively mislead her as a favor to their hurt colleague.

At the other extreme, an inadvertent act might cause a powerful Umbrood to direct his minions to seek the mage's death. Such an affront might even be the result of an action the mage is yet to perform. Tales have been told of Umbrood waging near war against groups of mages whom they expect to oppose them in the future. Wise men and spirits both point out that such offensives often cause self-fulfilling prophecies, but Umbrood inclined to such activities ignore these arguments.

These chronicles of destruction against the mages often start simply. Low-level minions of the injured Umbrood begin by causing minor annoyances. They steal minor items to inconvenience the mage. They arrange for accidental encounters with violent individuals. They provide assistance to groups already seeking the destruction or imprisonment of the mage.

If these activities seem insufficient to the task of properly punishing the willworker, the slighted Umbrood turns up the heat, so to speak. Allied spirits are sent to possess beings or to physically materialize and directly harry the mage. These Umbrood may recruit allies to attack the willworker or directly assult the mage themselves, depending on the personality of the minion in question. Such an escalation can progress until the mage or mages find themselves face to face with Umbrood who initiated the assaults. Worse yet, even if they defeat or destroy that being, more often than not there is another Umbrood, for whom the offended spirit worked, that will take offense at the humiliation of their servant. Such wars can continue until proper atonement is made, the mages manage to discredit the offended spirit without causing additional offense, or until even greater beings intervene.

The adversarial activities of 'playful' Umbrood are almost always more blatant than those of their angry kin. Spirits who assault mages with no reason other than boredom often do so out of a sense of experimentation. They might cause the mage constant headaches or insomnia to see how long it takes for the willworker to snap. They might physically alter various aspects of a willworker's personal reality just to see what will happen. As long as the mage reacts in an interesting manner, these 'attacks' can increase in frequency and severity. The Umbrood might do this on their own, or recruit others in their experiments. On the other hand, if the mage manages to somehow bore the Umbrood, the attacks can often stop as suddenly and inexplicably as they began.

Story Ideas

It's easy to include Umbrood in an story, but coming up with ideas wherein the Umbrood are the center of the story can be difficult. We've provided a few ideas to help you quick-start your Umbrood-based adventures.

Umbrood Master

One or more PC mages find themselves faced with a foe whom their already formidable abilities are unable to defeat. As a result, they follow rumors of a lost archmage into the Umbra in search of ancient secrets. Not long after their entry into the other world, they encounter a pesky spirit that refuses to leave them alone. A series of misadventures occur, some merely witnessed by the spirit, others caused by his clumsy nature. Along the way, the PCs hone their skills and learn secret weaknesses of their enemy. In the end, the spirit reveals that there was no lost archmage, and that he was the master they were seeking.

Migration!

An incarna and its endless number of minions were forced out of their realm, and now they're looking for a new home. Unfortunately their mass exodus takes them through many other realms whose own denizens interpret the arrival as invasion. Finding a new realm for the Umbrood becomes imperative, for when concepts go to war, everybody loses.

The Devil's In The Details

While pursuing another agenda, the PCs start to encounter repeated bad luck. As they begin to get paranoid about their misfortune, the more observant in their numbers begin to notice odd coincidences that occur every time things go wrong. If they check for paradox spirits, there is no indication that the PCs have drawn the wrath of reality down upon their heads. Further investigation, however, will indicate that they are the victims of a fairly powerful Umbrood's experiment. Alternatively, they are caught in a competition

between two spirits who are trying to see which can break the PCs' will first. Either way, the PCs must now figure out a way to direct their tormentors' attentions elsewhere.

Tag! You're It!

The PCs are making their way back through the Umbra after collecting an object (concept) that is critical to the continuation of the chronicle. Along the way, they are waylaid by a band of multiple identical small Umbrood who do the PCs no harm, but make off with the item in question. Naturally, the small spirits scatter and the PCs are forced to chase after each one to discover which has the item and where it was hidden. In the end, they discover a very large stash of the item they were looking for - an item they thought was unique. A little research reveals that their copy was a fake, but also that the stash contains the real thing.

Inside the Mind of Madness

Whether accidentally or intentionally, the PCs take a very odd side trip into the Umbra. While pursuing an enemy or other quarry, they transport into what they believe to be a material realm. They then rapidly realize that the realm is actually an incredibly massive Umbrood. They must track their prey through the physiology of a being that they cannot begin to comprehend and then find a way out intact. Note that the physiology will likely depend on the nature of Umbrood being visited. For example, if the PCs chase their foe into an Umbrood representing the concept of winter, they may find themselves in a terrain that is one part icy wasteland and one part super-sized biology. A variation on this adventure places the PC into the 'mind' of the Umbrood, rather than its physical being. Then again, the difference between the mind and body of such a being may not be as distinct as we think.

Umbrood Since the Storm

All of Balt and Machado's letters took place before the onset of the Avatar Storm. Since then, Umbrood interaction with earth has taken on some rather unique variations. It's much harder now for mages to trap spirits — they simply flee across the Gauntlet to escape, for most mages can't follow them! Additionally, Umbrood have begun to show up around earth in much greater frequency. Fewer Masters of Spirit cause trouble for them, and it's entirely possible that more powerful spirits will soon begin to make an appearance.

Remember, the Avatar Storm lets you shake things up as much or as little as you'd like. Now that mages can't go to spirits, bring the spirits to them!

Umbrood Statistics

Here's a collection of statistics for various kinds of Umbrood mentioned within Balt and Machado's letters. Note that each Umbrood below lists a number of charms. The Storyteller can find a description of these charms in the Mage Storytellers Companion. If unavailable, assign appropriate Sphere levels as a workaround.

Rheinhund (Upper Manager-Bishop)

Willpower 8, Rage 6, Gnosis 7, Power 55

Charms: Blighted Touch, Corruption, Dream Journey, Influence, Materialize

Materialized Attributes: Strength 2, Dexterity 2, Stamina 4, (Use Gnosis for Social and Mental traits)

Abilities: Academics 2, Awareness 2, Cosmology 4, Expression 4, Leadership 2, Occult 3, Performance 2

Materialized Health Levels: 7

Image: The Rheinhund's form always appears as somewhat indistinct, like a grey sheet that has been thrown over a storefront manikin. He has a voice like cobwebs snagging on broken glass and likes to say as little as possible, to allow his listeners to fill in the details with their own imagination. His current responsibility appears to be delivering nightmarish dreams to mortals.

John Henry

Willpower 6, Rage 8, Gnosis 5, Power 50

Charms: Armor, Blast, Iron Will

Materialize Attributes: Strength 5, Dexterity 3, Stamina 5, (Use Gnosis for Social and Mental traits)

Abilities: Brawl 3, Intimidation 4, Melee 3

Materialized Health Levels: 9

Image: John Henry is the ghost of the legendary steel-driving man. Unfortunately, no such man ever existed. Investigators theorize that this spirit was born when the legend of the fictional character's death began to spread. But don't tell this spirit that. He is incredibly powerful and blindly single-minded. He will do anything to prove his superiority. His Blast Charm takes the form of a hurled steel hammer.

The Changing Ones

Willpower, Rage, Gnosis, Power: varies

Charms: Shapeshift, varies with form

Image: The appearance, abilities, and indeed personality of the Umbrood known as the Changing Ones vary with their location and perhaps with time. Difficult to figure out, even among the enigmatic Umbrood, these spirits seem intimately tied to the nature of the Umbra itself. They can travel freely from layer to layer, and as they do, their very essence

seems to adapt to their new surroundings. A mage might encounter one of the Changing Ones a dozen times without discovering its nature, unless he chooses to follow and observe the being for an extended period of time.

Some mages theorize that the Changing Ones have a very specific agenda carefully hidden beneath their flexible exterior. However, no willworker has been able to determine that agenda and return to the material world to tell about it.

Sunset Violet

Willpower 9, Rage 3, Gnosis 6, Power 45

Charms: Appear, Cleanse the Blight, Cling, Dream Journey, Ease Pain, Influence

Image: Sunset Violet appears to be nothing more than a wavy band of color, dancing on the horizon. If glimpsed in a material realm, she might be mistaken for her namesake, a bit of the sunset held fast by the day. However, this spirit is much more than just a color. She is a holder of secrets and a calmer of souls. Violet is an adventurous spirit and will cling onto willing mages and accompany them on their journeys through the Umbra. If befriended, she will seek out mages in their dreams to gladden their hearts or inform them of an important secret. She claims to have been born during the last minutes before sunset on a fateful day as a lonely soul briefly saw the face of his lost love in the fading colors of the sky.

Messenger

Willpower 6, Rage 6, Gnosis 6, Power 40

Charms: Airt Sense, Appear, Flee, Iron Will, Mind Speech, Re-form, Track

Image: Messenger spirits are key to the Umbral communication system. They flit about constantly delivering messages from other spirits and mages alike.

Monsignor

Willpower 7, Rage 5, Gnosis 3, Power 25

Charms: Call for Aid, Iron Will

Image: Monsignors represent the lowest class of spirits in the Right Branch. They are slow moving, but once set to a task by their superiors, they complete it without question. They live in hope of gathering enough power and prestige by completing their tasks to advance through the ranks.

Technician

Willpower 3, Rage 5, Gnosis 7, Power 25

Charms: Cling, Iron Will

Image: Technicians represent the lowest class of spirits in the Left Branch. They scurry about quickly and efficiently, attempting to curry favor and good will from anyone or anything more powerful than them. They hope that by gathering enough good will they be elected to higher rank and have technicians to serve them.

Accountant

Willpower 5, Rage 3, Gnosis 7, Power 25

Charms: Call for Aid, Iron Will

Image: Spiritual number crunchers, accountants are responsible for tallying the rank and position of other spirits. They are nearly always nameless, faceless, and visually identical to one another. They also seem completely content with their task, which makes some sense, as they control the fates of an infinite number of Umbrood. Perhaps these humble spirits are the most powerful Umbrood of all.

Elemental

Willpower 3, Rage 7, Gnosis 5, Power 25

Charms: Varies by Elemental Type

Image: Nearly infinite in variety, these beings appear to be vaguely humanoid in form and to be constructed of the element they represent. Their composite material often dictates their level of activity or inactivity. Fire elementals often leap and flicker wildly, while metal or stone elementals may appear to be completely motionless for decades at a time.

Randomizing Umbrood Stats

Umbrood are a vast and changed class of beings. As such it is reasonable to believe that the stats that are provided for them might represent median or average values rather than absolutes. For those Storytellers who wish to take advantage of this variability and/or wish to keep their players guessing, the following system is suggested.

For each trait for which a number is recorded, consult the following chart and roll a new value for the particular spirit your players are to encounter.

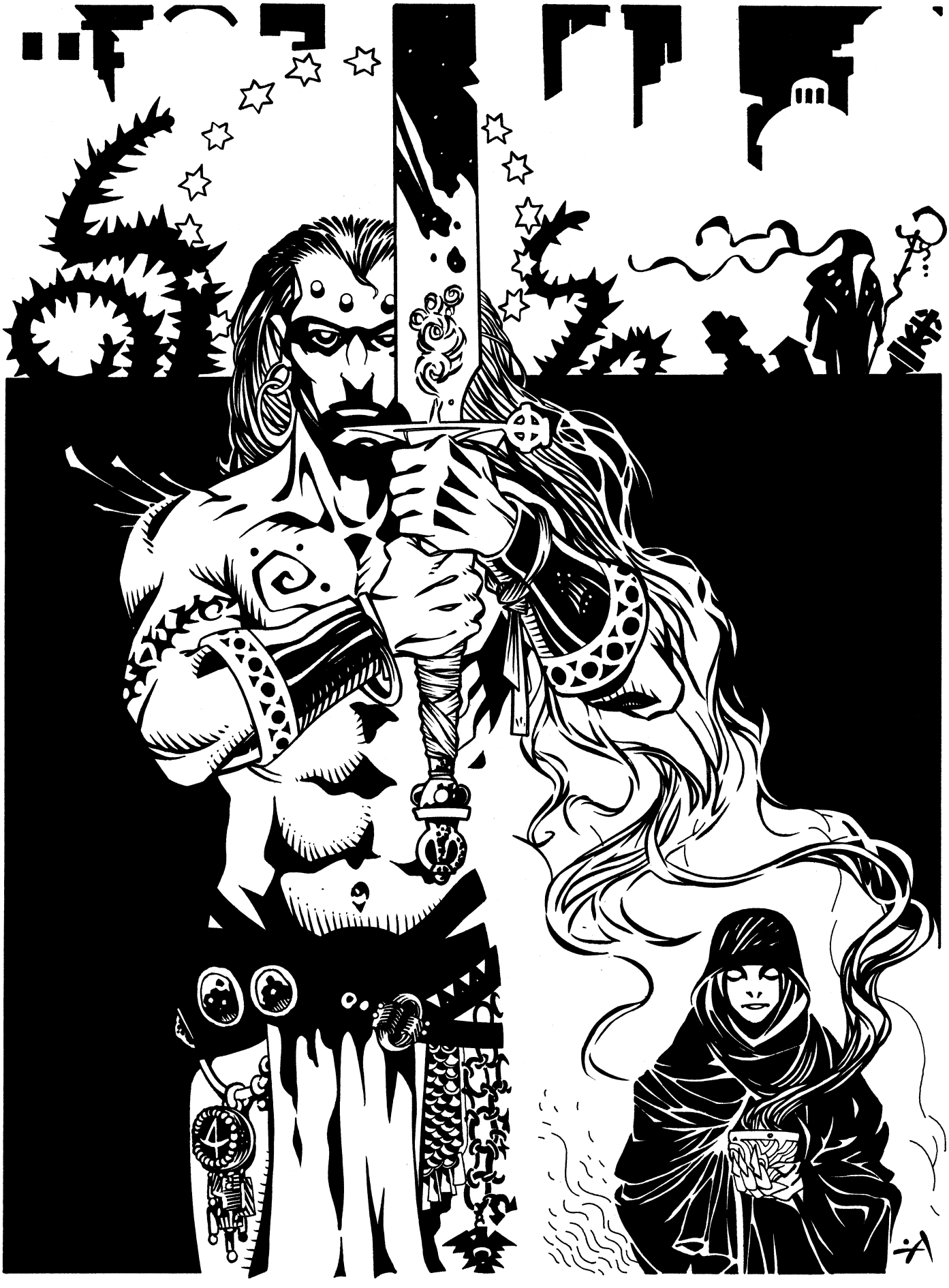
Listed Value	Dice to Roll	Difficulty	Resulting Trait
1	5	10	1+number of successes
2	5	9	1+number of successes
3	5	8	1+number of successes
4	5	7	1+number of successes
5	5	6	1+number of successes
6	10	6	1+number of successes
7	10	5	1+number of successes
8	10	4	1+number of successes
9	10	3	1+number of successes
10	10	2	1+number of successes

Regardless of the difficulty, tens always count as successes and are re-rolled for possible additional successes. Results above the normal maximum for the trait should be set at the maximum respectively. For example, physical traits normally have a cap of ten, so any results higher than 10 should normally be set equal to 10.

The number of traits each spirit will have randomized in this way will depend on the type of spirit and whether or not it has the Materialize Charm. For example, a Storyteller wishing to include in his story an Air Elemental with listed Traits Willpower 3, Rage 8, and Gnosis 7, rolls based on the table above. The Elemental encountered by the player characters has Willpower 4, Rage 6 and Gnosis 10. A Mechana Monsignor, on the other hand, will need to have random traits rolled for its Physical Attributes and Abilities in addition to its Willpower, Rage and Charm.

When rolling in this manner for a particular spirit's power, divide the listed power by 5 and roll as noted above. Then multiple the result by 5 to get the random power of the spirit.

This system is best used before a session and for unique spirits. If you are in a hurry or using a "throw-away" spirit you can use the base stats, or only re-roll the traits you need as you need them.



Chapter Five: Storytelling

Storytelling when Nephandi and Marauders are involved can be tough. When Marauders are surrounded by insanity, how do you make enough sense out of them to create your plots? When Nephandi are unknowably evil, how can you know enough about them in order to play them well? It helps to concentrate on the needs of the story, and to create your Storyteller characters as full-blown characters. The more detail you have, the more you understand them and the better you'll be able to play them.

Compelling Stories

The means to telling compelling stories with Marauders and Nephandi lies in the emotions they can evoke. Insanity and malice remain foreign concepts to many people. While it may be possible to empathize with someone who seems beyond the bend, it's difficult to understand those motives. An adversary who's completely inhumane and incomprehensible may be terrifying due to the scope of power and unpredictable motives, but it's not one that the players and characters can try to understand. An adversary with human foibles and characteristics is, instead, terrifying because it's an example of a human who's "broken" in some fashion, and the possibility that this can happen to people evokes fear in those that the crazed individual meets. Marauders and Nephandi don't all have to be utterly whacked — they, like other mages, were people once, and should continue to have motivations, emotions and histories that point to their human roots.

Madness

Madness terrifies people. Managers terminate employees who admit to having mental problems. Parents refuse to take children in for treatment. After all, if the child is diagnosed with a mental illness then that might imply that the parent or other relatives could have one, and that's unthinkable. Other parents take children in for treatment at the drop of a dime. They use psychologists and medications to treat normal recalcitrance and disobedience.

Many insurance companies refuse to cover mental health treatment or psychiatric medications. People use the term "crazy" disparagingly without ever really considering what it means. People refuse to go for desperately-needed treatments themselves because they've been told all their lives that their behavior is their own "fault." Clinically depressed people are told by their friends to "snap out of it," "cheer up," and "get over it." When they can't, their friends desert them.

Society's behavior toward the mentally ill arguably causes just as many problems as mental illness itself. Thousands go untreated just because they're told they should be able to control their own behavior. They feel that to see a professional is to admit they aren't good enough. Where a little compassion would do wonders, people instead sneer at and shy away from the mentally ill. Every one of us wonders, "could that happen to me?"

The answer is yes.

No one knows all of the factors that affect emotional balance. But we do know that people who've been fine for years can suddenly fall into a clinical depression for no obvious reason. People who've led happy lives commit suicide at age 50 or 60. Adolescence, puberty, and the hormonal mess that is teenage life trigger all sorts of disorders. People who become manic can come out of it to find that they've gone $10,000 dollars into debt, sold their house, and dived into potentially dangerous situations like unprotected sex with multiple strangers or drug addictions. Under these circumstances, small wonder that people with mania tend to view the intense forgetfulness that usually comes with it as a blessing.

These are simple mood disorders. Mental disorders get a whole lot stranger and more disturbing than that. If you think it's frightening to watch a madman, imagine what it's like to be that madman. Imagine what it feels like to meet up with someone you knew ten years ago in college and have him remind you of all the humiliating things you did when you were manic. To you that was your illness acting, and you're better now on medication. To him that's who you were, and always will be.

Think about the depressed woman who literally cannot do any work, and has to explain why to a boss who thinks that anyone can "pull themselves out of a funk if they try hard enough. It's all a matter of willpower." Small wonder that she feels it's all her own fault, when everyone tells her so day after day.

Perhaps you can begin to see why it is that madness is disturbing, terrifying, and very, very compelling.

Mages do not fear Marauders because of their crazed behavior. They do not fear Marauders because of what's happened to their Avatars. They do not fear Marauders because of what madmen might do.

Mages fear Marauders for two reasons. The first is that they *do not understand* Marauders. Marauders are indecipherable entities. They are aliens, even though they're as human as you or I.

From this comes the second reason. Mages look at Marauders and they ask themselves, "could that happen to me?" And the answer is yes.

The Loss of Control

For the moment we will discuss "ordinary" mental illness, as it makes a good parallel to the state of the Marauder. What we apply to normal people and "normal" mental illness may also be applied to mages and Marauders.

The thing that some of the mentally ill fear and others welcome, is the loss of control that often comes with mental illness. The mentally ill exhibit all sorts of bizarre and often dangerous behavior. Manics are said to exhibit "risk-taking" behavior. Someone who is paranoid might yell at or hurt a friend while under the influence of his delusions. Many find this humiliating and embarrassing when they come out of it and realize the things they've done, whether small or large.

Still others might welcome, at least at times, the ability to do things they might not normally do. A shy person might, under the grip of mania, find the courage to make a pass at someone she finds attractive. Such states, however, rarely remain at a pleasant level; they often progress to an uncomfortable, even terrifying state.

For someone first experiencing a mental illness they often feel as though their life is spiraling out of their control. One day they're getting okay grades, enjoying the freedom of their freshman year in college, and meeting new people. The next they can't even get out of bed because they're so paralyzed with depression. Four months later they're high as a kite, experiencing what psychologists call "religious feelings," and doing drugs in an effort to self-medicate.

On some level, however deep, they can see that things are going wrong. They notice that they've almost entirely stopped going to classes. They realize that final exams are coming up and they have no idea what their classes are about. But that only makes things worse.

The more stressed they become, the worse the situation becomes. Stress aggravates many symptoms of mental illness. Paranoia deepens. Dependency becomes more pronounced. Depression deepens or mania spirals up off the deep end. If things get really bad the individual may experience a psychotic break, in which the person truly loses touch with reality for a little while.

This isn't comfortable in any way shape or form, no matter how many times the mentally ill tell you they're just fine in an attempt to hold their lives together by willing it so. They know very well that anyone they confess their true feelings to could call the "men in the white coats." They're tired of seeing that look of fear in a good friend's eye when they try to explain what's wrong.

It also isn't fun to watch this happen to someone. What do you do about it? Do you take him to a doctor against his will and risk him never trusting you again, or perhaps even hating you? And what if the doctor does more harm than good? Treating mental illness can be like groping around in the dark; there's no sure way to diagnose and treat it.

Do you spend long hours trying to convince your friend that he needs help, only to lose all of your work in a single episode of flying high "I feel great!" mania?

Do you pretend it isn't happening and hope that it'll go away on its own? While there are exceptions to every rule, most mental illnesses doesn't go away without treatment. Many mental illnesses require treatment for the rest of a patient's life.

Mental patients are particularly difficult to medicate. Imagine the paranoid who's sure someone's poisoning his pills. The depressive who can't lift her arm to pick up the water glass, let alone take her pills. The manic who feels just spec-TAC-ular, thank you very much, and doesn't need them. The patient who just doesn't understand that his views are in any way weird or outrageous and so doesn't see that he has a problem to be treated.

Or do you give up and leave your friend behind to suffer alone?

A story about madness will be an uncomfortable one. Everyone has known at some time in their lives one of the mentally ill. One in ten people today suffers from some sort of mood disorder, usually clinical depression. With those kinds of odds you've probably known several mentally ill people, whether or not you realized it.

Let the players' characters see the Marauder's effect on other people. Let them see the ones who ignore her. Let them see the ones who try to help her and get brushed off. Let them see the ones who feel fear around her.

Play upon the characters' (and players') views toward the Marauder. Give them the chance to choose whether to help her, turn her over to someone who offers to try to "help" her, or just walk away and give up. Let them see her not just when she's at her worst, but when she's at her best. Let them see her try to pretend she's okay. Let them see her gratitude for any blackouts or mini-amnesias she may suffer while ill.

If they help her, show them that it isn't that easy. They can't just give her some pills and expect that she's fine, or take her to the doctor and wash their hands of her. Pills don't always work. Or it may take several tries to find the right medication, and the ones that don't work may do more harm than good. The doctor might fail to give her the blood tests to go with the medication, resulting in toxic levels of the drug collecting in her system.

A mental hospital may release the Marauder back out onto the street. After all, she was fine when she was with them and medicated, and they can't help it if she doesn't take her pills when she isn't with them. Insurance won't pay for an eternal stay, and even if it would they don't have the facilities for everyone. On top of that some people simply don't respond to treatment, *particularly* Marauders.

You may let the player characters see others' views of the Marauder first so that they may be very surprised by the reality of it when they meet her. You may let them see her side of things first so that they feel trapped wondering what to do about her when they see how she disturbs the world around her. Introduce them to a Marauder who seems almost entirely normal: show them that the difference between "sane" and "insane" may be very narrow indeed.

Don't let them get out of it, though, without first making them wonder: Could it happen to me?

Isolation

Most of the mentally ill feel isolated in at least one way or another. For some, it's an aspect of their illness. The paranoid simply feel that they can't trust people, and that isolates them. The depressed feel that no one cares about them. Some lose the ability to communicate almost entirely.

For others, their behavior is odd enough that people actively stay away from them. Tables near them at cafés remain empty. No one takes the seats next to them on the bus. People look at them and whisper, or say cruel things out loud (after all, the feelings of a crazy person don't matter, right?). In some places the proprietor of an establishment might actually kick them out, simply because they make the other customers feel uncomfortable.

The mentally ill tend to gradually lose their friends and family. Some of them seek this, either deliberately (they don't have to see the looks on their friends' faces any more) or as a facet of their illness. The paranoid might deliberately move away from anyone he thinks could hurt him. The depressive can't help but accuse the people who love her of not caring. Even the depressive who doesn't do such things is often given ultimatums: "cheer up or I'll leave you." It sounds ridiculous, but such things happen quite regularly. It doesn't help, of course. Either the friend leaves and the depressive feels worse, or the depressive simply learns to fake being cheerful.

Focus on the sheer isolation the Marauder feels. The player characters will probably think that Marauders are terrible, ravening beasts. Let them see just how lonely and frightened Marauders can be. Let them see a Marauder who goes into a book store just to be near people for a little while, but gets kicked out for no better reason than that he makes the other customers feel weird.

If you're sure you can keep your player characters from deciding to kill the Marauder out of hand, then build him up as just the beast the player characters are expecting. Do it either through his actions or through misunderstandings. Only then let them see him from his own perspective, in a lucid moment or when properly medicated. Allow them to see how alone he is, and how much that frightens him.

Madness and Guilt

One of the problems facing our legal system today is the thorny insanity defense. It was originally constructed to allow people temporarily not under their own control (through a medication side effect, a brain tumor that was later removed, and so on) to not be found guilty for what they had no control over and have no chance of doing again.

It was not meant as a way to allow anyone with possible mental problems to go free after committing a crime. Someone with a mental illness may truly be said to not be under his own control when he does something terrible. But does that help, if he is almost always not under his own control, and will almost definitely repeat the behavior in question?

Under today's system we end up with several problems. For one, jails are used to house many mentally ill people who would be much better off receiving actual treatment — the result of a guilty verdict. Two, many mentally ill people are treated for short periods of time after committing crimes, then released again — the result of a successful insanity defense. Either way someone loses. It doesn't help that no one has a good definition of "mental illness." Psychologists can't even agree on exactly which conditions should be included and which shouldn't.

This is a difficult problem to solve. There are plenty of mentally ill people who could benefit from treatment and might never commit a crime again. But how do you distinguish between these and the people who will repeat offense? And who's going to pay for the treatment, the doctor's time, and the bed space? Insurance rarely does.

A new type of judgement, "guilty but insane," has been proposed in some places. Why stop there, though? As Harvard law professor Ellsworth Fersch has said, how about guilty but extremely wealthy? Guilty but oppressed? Guilty but abused? Guilty but very very sorry? This sort of thing may ease people's feelings of uneasiness at convicting the mentally ill, but it doesn't actually do anything to solve anyone's problems.

Supernatural entities often hold themselves to be beyond the law. They see themselves as policing their own. This is possibly least true for mages, as they don't have quite as much to fear from a stay in jail as some of the others. They won't accidentally shift shape in their jail cell. They won't turn into a pile of dust when the sun shines through their cell window.

This means that you can run two different types of story along the theme of madness and guilt. The first one is a legal story. Should the Marauder be held responsible in a legal sense (whether by an actual legal authority or by mages) for her actions? Perhaps a Marauder commits a crime and is caught at it by either legal authorities or other mages. In jail, she receives treatment and because of that, or another reason, seems mostly lucid, "recovered." Does this mean she isn't guilty?

Second, is the Marauder personally responsible for her actions? The Marauder does something unsavory, whether legally a crime or not. Who will hold him responsible? Who will demand reparations from him? Who will insist that he cannot be responsible for his actions?

The fact that many Marauders are arguably "innocent" people trapped by insane Avatars doesn't make this dilemma any easier. You can't just jail the Avatar and let the mage go.

There are many possibilities for where you can take this, and you shouldn't let anyone else dictate them. Everyone has his own ideas, often very strong ones, of who is responsible for what. Only bring this subject into your campaign if your players are capable of debating issues that are important to them without getting angry at each other.

Magic and Madness

Another worthwhile consideration is the problem of what causes insanity in mages. While the Technocracy would be more than happy to closet away any deviant mage and pump the offender full of medication, the Traditions house people whose everyday behaviors might very well be considered insane by the general populace. What definition applies to "insanity"?

Tradition mages, too, may not hold with the idea of medication. A master of the Mind Sphere likely doesn't see insanity as a problem of physiological brain chemistry — it's a metaphysical problem, stemming from ill-adjusted chi energies, or malevolent influences, or altered patters of radiative absorption, or any number of other factors that aren't treatable with drugs or psychotherapy.

A mage might use holistic therapy, charms or other magical techniques to try to cure insanity (as with any other injury or illness), but how long does this really last? The mage needs to reinforce the spell from time to time; permanent Pattern alteration is chancy at best. Worse still, Marauder madness stems not only from psychological problems but also from Avatar damage, so it's nearly impossible to treat for someone less than an Archmaster.

How do the Traditions decide when someone's "insane"? Who chooses what's an appropriate treatment? With the Traditions in need of as many allies as possible, is there really room to accept some ill-adjusted mages into the fold? These questions are about humanity and morality, and should certainly occupy the characters' sensibilities — especially if other Traditionalists disagree and are in a position to make decisions that the players find difficult or repugnant.

Destruction

Destruction is frightening not because we wonder "can that happen to us," but because it *does* happen to us.

First consider the side of the person committing the destruction. It's deceptively easy to go from killing a cockroach in your kitchen, to having a stray dog taken to the pound and put to sleep, to thinking of the bum in the alley nearby as a nuisance that needs to be gotten rid of, maybe permanently this time.

By the time you realize how far you've gone it's probably too late, if you ever realize it at all.

Then consider the side of the person at the receiving end of the destruction. You cannot entirely protect yourself. You can live in a good neighborhood, never walk home alone, lock your car doors when you drive, and even keep a weapon by your bedside.

There's no way to prevent someone from ever making the decision to harm you, though. It could come at any time and in any way. Many people let this fear rule their lives. They stay well-armed, even though no one has ever actually bothered them. They move out into the country in hopes that it will be safer than the city. They keep mace in their purses. They do everything they can to protect themselves.

Yet, they must always live with the possibility that it *might not be enough.*

Nephandi frighten mages for a number of reasons, and the fact that they serve dark masters of corruption is the least of these. Nephandi, by their very existence, remind us that we, too, can slide down that slippery slope. Mages must hate and kill Nephandi simply to prove that they haven't slid down that slope. In doing so, they commit the very acts they seek to prove they could never descend to.

In addition, the presence of Nephandi allows mages to indulge their destructive urges. Most mages won't look down upon them for killing Nephandi. In fact, many mages will give them reward and acclaim for their actions, however violent.

Nephandi also remind us that we are never safe. Mages may become powerful enough that they feel they have nothing to fear from normal humans. They no longer worry about random thugs with guns, or thieves with knives. Nephandi remind them that there's still something to fear in the universe. There exist things that can hurt mages, no matter how much magic they learn.

In addition, and perhaps most distressing of all, Nephandi seem to possess some tie to the primordial cosmos that no other mage can ever lay claim to. They understand and wield basic forces that mages never will — unless said mages, too, allow themselves to become corrupted. While

mages may ever strive to understand the universe, Nephandi have a leg up on them. Most mentors teach apprentices that morality is a part of mystical power. Whether it's morality in the form of kindness or "doing good" or simply doing what your mentor thinks is best, it's there. Nephandi lack that morality, and yet they lay claim to an understanding of magic that no other mage has.

Thus, in every way, Nephandi offend the most basic sensibilities that mages hold so dear. Mages may indeed fear the violent actions of Nephandi. They also know on some level that only a very fine line separates them from the Nephandi. This line is hard to see, and may fall behind them before they even see it coming. Thus mages fear what Nephandi *are*, what they *represent*, even more than simple violence. More than the Nephandi, they fear themselves.

The Corruption of the Soul

No one's soul is perfectly, one hundred percent innocent. Everyone does something imperfect sometime. In a way, this is necessary in order to survive the world we live in, particularly the World of Darkness. If you cringed and flinched any time you boiled water and killed off those poor bacteria who never did you any harm, you wouldn't be able to read the newspaper without breaking into hysterics. The first person who yelled at you in traffic would cause you lasting emotional trauma.

The trick is to avoid falling down the slippery slope. If it's okay to kill someone who breaks into your home, is it okay to kill someone who looks like they might be casing it? If it's okay to kill someone who commits murder, then what about someone who tried to commit murder and failed?

Everyone chooses the level at which they'll dig their heels in and stay. Since it's a continuum, though, there's no good way to say for sure that this level is good and that level is evil. Everything is relative. The definition of "evil" depends upon the mores and morals of a society, and that definition is different for every society and time period. Because nothing can be black and white, it's hard to know when to stop. Once you take one step, the next looks a whole lot closer than it did before. It's surprisingly easy to allow yourself to be corrupted. A single compromise opens the door.

Let your players see just how easy it is. Pick a Storyteller character they deal with regularly and slowly, carefully, small step by small step, lead him down the dark path in the background of some other, more major, plots. Let the characters see and hear small things going on in the Storyteller character's life, little clues to what's going on. Before they realize what's happened, someone has convinced their friend (who's "just having a rough time right now,") to go through the Caul.

Let them follow their friend's transition from reasonably good person to "evil" the entire way without realizing exactly what's going on. Show them just how reasonable the slide can be, how seductive, how difficult to recognize. Show them that corruption isn't as foreign a thing as they think. Let them see that they aren't much different than their friend was, and wonder whether they're on that path too.

Alternatively, allow them to research the background of a Nephandus they're having problems with. They eventually find family, childhood friends. Maybe a college roommate. All of these people describe the subject as a nice guy. He'd go out of his way to help his friends. He was fun to hang out around. He knew how to make people laugh. It always seemed like he'd "go far." Let them wonder how it is that someone could go from that to Nephandi-hood.

If you think your group is up to it, let a Storyteller character Nephandus try to lead a player's character to his corruption. If you have a good group of players, and if it's handled with care, such a story can be incredibly compelling. If you have any reason to think that your players can't handle it, that the subject matter will make them giggle and joke around, then definitely don't do it. Beware, however: this sort of story can ultimately make a character unplayable, so you might want to check with the player to make sure they're okay with that.

The Loss of Innocence

Many Nephandi particularly delight in the corruption of the innocent. It's a challenge. It's a way of really proving that you can corrupt someone. After all, anyone can start with a drunkard with a bad gambling habit who hits his wife and kids, and corrupt him. That's nothing. To start with an innocent, with a naïve and kind person, and to turn him into a villain is the greatest corruption of all. One movie that's all about the corruption of innocence is "Dangerous Liaisons," and it's amazing to watch the scheming that goes on.

There's something terrible about the loss of innocence. To see a sweet and naive person become

jaded and harsh angers us. We seek to protect the innocence of children to the point where we often don't even notice that they aren't innocent any more. The loss of innocence so upsets us that we blind ourselves to it.

Quite often, we become angry at the innocent for losing his innocence. We ask him, how could you turn into such a creep when you were so nice?

Allow one or more characters to become friends with an "innocent." While it may be argued (as above) that no one is ever entirely innocent, it's all a matter of degrees. When someone kind and sweet gradually begins to act like a creep, watch to see whether the character becomes angry at that person, or realizes that something is wrong. If you execute the descent slowly and carefully enough, it's likely to be the former rather than the latter. Once the player characters have become thoroughly angry at their former friend, let them find out that a Nephandus architected the slide.

Then let them find out that while they can get rid of the Nephandus, they can never bring back their old friend. Innocence once corrupted may never return.

Wrong Time, Wrong Place

Violence is a terrifying thing, especially when you may be on the receiving end of it at any time. player characters in a roleplaying game often become inured to the terror of violence, as to them it's just rolls of the dice and health levels.

Let them experience violence without "combat." Someone close to them (a Storyteller character) is hurt, badly, and taken to the hospital. Ultimately it's the fault of one or more Nepahandi; the loved one was in the wrong place at the wrong time. There are no dodges, no soak rolls and no easy healing. After all, even if one of the mages knows Life magic, she can't heal someone who's in the care of a hospital without attracting a *lot* of attention. Or for some reason (Nephandi can be sneaky after all) magic won't heal the wounds.

Draw out the experience. This is no simple bruise that goes away over a couple of days. It requires painful treatments and drugs with side-effects. It requires a long hospital stay and blood transfusions. If the player's character doesn't visit her friend she'll need to face her friend's anger. If she does visit her, she is constantly reminded of her friend's pain with every hiss of breath and every slow movement.

This should give the characters a harsh reminder of just how dangerous the world really is — not in terms of health levels, but in terms of pain and blood. And it should give them a whole lot of incentive to hunt the Nephandi down and deal with them, permanently.

General Hints for Storytelling with Nephandi

Nephandi can introduce touchy subject matter into your game as well as some fairly adult themes. If your players can't handle it, don't go there. If you aren't sure whether they can handle it, then start small and see how things go. Back out if you have to: you can always come up with an alternate reason for the things you introduced into your game and let the Nephandi make a silent exit.

When storytelling with Nephandi, take a tip from the best psychological thrillers out there: hint. There's little need for graphic descriptions of actions and victims. Besides, when you hint rather than filling in all the gaps, people will tend to fill in those gaps themselves with whatever frightens them most. This makes it a very effective technique.

There's also little need to have graphic torture, rape, or violence happen to the players' characters. For one, some of your players may have bad incidents in their past that you don't know about, which could make such events extremely uncomfortable for them. You could even lose players (or friends!) that way. For another, it can often be more effective to have these events happen to the characters' friends, relatives, and loved ones.

Most players won't be able to imagine and roleplay the horror of having such terrible things happen to their characters (a certain amount of self-preservation kicks in). It's much easier to imagine terrible things happening to other people, and to imagine one's own response to such things. This is also less likely to make a character unplayable. After all, such horrible experiences scar most people who go through them. Some victims never recover at all.

If you choose to explore the fall of a player's character, or if you simply must have such a character present at a terrible event, then fade to black. It's like a movie sex scene where both people go into the bedroom and the lights just go down. Everyone knows what happens next. There's no need for a blow-by-blow description that could make players uncomfortable or reduce the room to a giggling pile of adolescents, ruining an otherwise powerful scene.

Villains, Antagonists, and "Others"

Villains and antagonists are good for more than just climactic combats. They're more than just collections of combat-oriented stats and powers. A good antagonist is just as complex a character as any good player character. It's best if Nephandi and Marauders remain mysterious to your players, but you as the Storyteller should understand their motivations and madnesses. On some level their behavior should make sense to you. If it doesn't, they will not behave consistently — or, at the very least, their behaviors won't follow any reasonable goal. (Some mad mages *are* rather inconsistent in their pursuits, after all.)

Villains, Antagonists, and Character Detail

Background material on any Storyteller character who will serve as more than just a punching bag is vital. How do you improvise his reactions to the party if you don't know why he does what he does? Background material is one way to make your Storyteller characters stand out from each other, particularly your antagonists. Otherwise, one enemy begins to sound much like another. Marauders and Nephandi can provide you with one way to jump-start yourself out of a Storyteller character rut, but it's easy to become trapped in stereotypes. You still need your background material to protect against that.

Write at least a few sentences about your antagonist's family. Yes, her family. She did have one: parents, aunts and uncles, brothers and sisters, cousins, maybe even a husband and children. Or grandchildren! Many Storyteller characters seem to spring from Storytellers' foreheads as adults with no background, and it shows. The addition of a few family members can add so much dimension to characters.

When you're done with family, move on to past history: What did your antagonist do outside of interactions with his family? What significant events shaped who he is? Who influenced him? Then think about what he does now. How does he make money? Does he have any friends or enemies? What does he do in his spare time? Move on to his projects. What is he trying to accomplish, and why?

Add a few lines each about appearance, personality, friends and contacts. Then add in something few people ever think about: your antagonist's blind spots. Is there a certain person he trusts absolutely? Is there a type of item he always purchases? Does someone possess potential blackmail material on him? Does he care deeply for a certain person? With luck, this material should flow naturally from the background you've already invented.

What makes this character a Nephandus or Marauder? What spurred her on to "sell her soul?" What drove her Avatar mad, and in what way? Without this information you're likely to fall into the trap of stereotyping. You need to know the reasons and motivations behind your Storyteller character's madness or "evil." By the time you're done you'll have far more than an average antagonist, and you'll be ready for almost anything.

Personality Limits Power

One problem many people have found is that intelligent antagonists may seem nigh-unstoppable. They have intelligence, useful abilities, frightening powers, friends (or at least contacts), and, on top of all of this, fewer of those pesky moral qualms about doing nasty things (while the players' characters often need to play by the rules). This can be a real recipe for trouble.

Creating an antagonist who is also a complex character can take care of this quite easily. Those "blind spots" you detailed are potential weaknesses for your players' characters to exploit. Family members may be sources of information. Past history may help the troupe to analyze the way your antagonist thinks and to outsmart her. If the villain has a history of visiting certain people or going to certain places, this may suggest ambush points.

Any real person has both strengths and weaknesses that may be exploited by clever opponents. Antagonists need this treatment as well as players' characters, if not more so. This provides a means to reward clever players who do more than bulk up their characters and plan attacks. After all, if the characters spend time doing their research, they'll have a much better chance of defeating their antagonist. Maybe they'll even find a way to do it that doesn't involve as much danger to themselves as an all-out combat does.

Morals also aren't the only things that limit character activity. This is where those sections on history and family come in handy. There are plenty of people who will kill, but only under certain circumstances. There are others who will kill, but can't stand to see someone suffer. There are plenty of things that people refuse to do that have nothing to do with moral values. Someone might not care whether or not other people die, but he sees death as a grotesque thing that he would never get up close and personal with himself. There's a difference between a lack of moral values and a lack of inhibitions. What are your antagonist's inhibitions?

Another thing that may reward player research and creativity, as well as limit a villain's power, is a villain's list of enemies. If an antagonist does "bad" things, then surely he has angered someone else besides the players' cabal. What about other enemies? Past victims? Surely there are other people who can give aid in at least the form of "this thing we tried didn't work." Maybe they know a few details about the villain that the cabal doesn't and can set them on the trail of further information.

If your players seem determined to solve everything through combat, bring out an antagonist's past victim. Make it clear that combat didn't work for him, and he had at least as powerful a group as the player characters. But since then he's found out where the villain's family lives, and he thinks that maybe the villain's little sister would be willing to talk if only he could get her alone....

Antagonists vs. Villains

Not all of the cabal's enemies have to be "villains." The word villain implies evil, or "bad guy." Usually it's used to imply that the enemy may be killed without any bad feelings, because he has done terrible things and thus deserves it. This tends to encourage players to solve their problems through combat, as they know that if the enemy lives, he'll just come back later and make life even more difficult for them. In addition, if he lives he's likely to go on hurting people, and that'll be their fault for not killing him.

Isn't it amazing how much implication you can find in one little word?

A plot of this type is fun now and then, because of its simple, easy, black and white nature. The players don't have to muck around with gray areas. They don't have to ponder moral ambiguities. They can go in, pull a trigger or swing a sword, get a quick adrenaline thrill, and be done with it. If this is the only kind of antagonist they face, however, life gets boring very quickly, and they're missing out on a lot of very interesting roleplaying. These plots are best used as occasional "breaks" from other sorts of plots, a kind of emotional and mental recess.

Instead of making every foe a villain, play around with antagonists. The American College Dictionary definition for "antagonist" is: "One who is opposed to or strives with another in any kind of contest; opponent; adversary." Thus an antagonist is someone who opposes the cabal for any reason, not simply because he is evil or bad.

An antagonist may oppose the cabal for any number of reasons. Perhaps the players' mages killed or hurt someone she cared about. Maybe they stepped on something she considers her concern. Maybe the antagonist is going along minding her own damn business and just happens to step on something the characters consider *their* concern. Perhaps she's doing something reasonable that just looks bad. Or maybe, given our current subject of Nephandi and Marauders, she *thinks* she's doing one (reasonable) thing when *really* she's doing another (objectionable) thing. Perhaps the cabal goes after her simply because they have reason to believe her to be a Nephandus or a Marauder. And then there are always the projects that do good things in general, or at least neutral things, yet have side effects that bother the players' characters or people they care about. Or the ones that don't hurt people but are ethically questionable.

In addition, the antagonist's plans might simply act at cross purposes to the players' characters'. What if they have a plan that requires a certain Talisman, yet the antagonist's plan requires the same Talisman? She isn't a villain, yet she's certainly going to try to foil the cabal so that she can get her hands on that Talisman. Antagonists don't have to wish the characters ill in order to do bad things to them.

One particularly easy way to bring in antagonists who aren't necessarily villains is to play with personal plots. Personal plots (plots that involve things of emotional import to the characters, which are usually not of epic import or world-shaking status) are, by their very nature, remarkably subjective. Because of this, it's easy to have plots that look one way to the antagonist and another to the players.

All of this becomes particularly complicated when discussing Marauders and Nephandi. A Nephandus may have nothing against the cabal, yet his masters may manipulate him into a position (deliberately or not) where he comes into conflict with the characters. A Marauder's insane Avatar may put her into a position such that she cannot help but go up against the cabal. The Nephandus in this scenario may be evil, but he may well not be a villain. The Marauder may be mad, but again, that doesn't mean she's a villain.

Luckily the transition from villain to antagonist is pretty easy. You'll probably find that detailing a villain's motivations, history and family — all the things listed previously — is enough to move him from villain to antagonist, at least in most cases. Few "real" people, with complex motivations and reasons for what they do, can really be called "villains" (although yes, there are some).

Avoiding Stereotypes

What's the first thing you think of when you hear the word "Nephandus?" Well, you probably start with the idea that it's a mage who sold his soul to demonic masters, right? That's certainly one of the stereotypes, and it's one of the mental "shorthands" that we use to remember what Nephandi are.

What about Marauders? Do you think of completely unhinged lunatics who go around spreading madness with their magic? Well again, that's one of the stereotypes, and that's our shorthand method of remembering what Marauders are.

Unfortunately, when you indulge in these shorthands, they become reflected in the characters you create. This means that pretty much every Nephandus you create will bear some resemblance to that stereotypical *eeeevil* magus. Every Marauder will have a touch of that wacky Hollywood madman to him. Not only are you tapping into images of what these creatures really aren't, but your Nephandi and Marauders will be all the more predictable to your players. The cabal's mages will be able to recognize which Storyteller characters are Marauders and which are Nephandi, even if you think you've done a pretty good job of hiding it this time.

Nephandi

It must be said time and time again — Nephandi are more than just evil. They have motivations for the terrible things they do. Simply by detailing the

background of your Nephandus, you may avoid many of the stereotyped nasty-magician pitfalls. There are still stereotypes, however, even here; there's the abused product of a broken home, for example, whose trials and tribulations may or may not excuse his actions, but at least explain them.

Some part of this description is true for many Nephandi. Most of them probably feel as though they were wronged somewhere along the line.

First of all, this doesn't mean that they have to fit the stereotype. The fact that they were wronged, abused, hurt, or mistreated doesn't have to be the entirety of your explanation. Why were they wronged? How were they hurt? Details go a long way toward breaking stereotypes, as stereotypes are of necessity broad categories.

Secondly, what have they done about that hurt? How have they moved on, or not? Just because some past hurt triggered their original descent into Nephandi-hood doesn't mean that it occupies their every waking moment, or even in any way defines their current agenda or motives. They may not really think of it any more, or even remember it in some cases. Some people bury their traumas. People move on. People grow up, even the nasty ones. So you write up a Nephandus' history and it says that he was abused and got mad because of it. Now assume that this was five, ten, even forty years pre-game. What happened next?

Third, not only abused people grow up to be mean and to do bad things. How often do you hear about shootings at schools and all the interviews with parents and friends who just can't believe their child or friend would do such a thing? A certain amount of that may be the blindness that comes with emotional closeness, but it is true that people who seem just fine one day may snap the next.

Never confuse this, however, with the idea that the Nephandus has no reason for what it is he does. Just because it seems that someone snaps for no reason doesn't mean that it's true. There are always hidden hurts, hidden failures, hidden triggers. And there are emotional fluctuations that can cause sudden shifts in personality, such as those brought on by bipolar disorder. Some personality "changes" may be brought on as side effects (sometimes permanent ones!) of medication or of physical illnesses.

Just keep in mind that not all Nephandi were abused children or ostracized nerds in high school. Plenty of football jocks, cheerleaders, and homecoming queens with rich parents go on to possess impressive records of cruelty.

Marauders

When looking for inspiration for Marauders, avoid most movies. Movies generally like to go for the most violent, most crazed, most obvious, most stereotypical madmen they can.

Mind you, in the occasional rare case outright madmen can be interesting. For instance, the character of Hannibal Lecter in "Silence of the Lambs" may have been crazy and done some fairly wild things, but he also spoke with intelligence and clarity. He was capable of carrying on conversations and relationships with people that consisted of more than just the standard predator, cryptic inspiration, outright lunatic, or annoying irritation dynamic.

Many people think of "crazy" as synonymous with stupid or brain-damaged. This isn't true at all. While mental illness *may* dull a person's faculties or warp her thinking, some types of illness are heavily correlated with intelligence and creativity. Many famous artists and writers, for example, have been diagnosed with bipolar disorder.

Remember that the Marauder's problem is that technically her Avatar is nuts, or that her connection to her Avatar is completely mucked up. While this may drive the Marauder insane, and of course she may have been insane to start with, she's probably a mostly-normal mage trapped inside of a very bad interpreter. Her Avatar has mucked with her perceptions, twisted up her magical paradigm, and turned the world inside-out.

Thus, rather than starting from how you think the Marauder acts or in what way she's crazy, think about how she sees the world.

First, what does her Avatar think that it's trying to show her? Is the Avatar bent on dragging its mage kicking and screaming into its personal idea of "enlightenment?" If so, what is that enlightenment? How does it instruct the mage about that enlightenment?

Second, and perhaps more importantly, when all is said and done, what does the mage herself actually see and hear? Does she see the world as normal, with just a few details changed here and there? Does she see and hear full-blown hallucinations. If so, of what type? How is the world interpreted for her?

Third, how does this look to the outside world? How does she come across to other people? How is her altered world-view reflected in her behavior?

Fourth, what did this to her? The Marauder did not start out life trapped in this broken world. She

was once a normal person, or probably close to it, anyway. She once lived a normal life. Maybe she even lived as a normal mage for a while before she became a Marauder for whatever reason. What is that reason?

Fifth, what has this done to her? Her entire world has been turned upside-down, to some small or large degree. She cannot continue in this unscathed. While some few Marauders may be made to see their personal view of reality as "normal," most probably realize that something is wrong. What does this do to them? If you were Alice trapped in Wonderland for the rest of your life with no way out, wouldn't you go just a little bit mad yourself?

Now that you have somewhere to start and a few things to think about, you may consider real-world insanities to work with if you so choose. Try looking through psychological case studies — books of them are available in various places. One such book is the "DSM-IV Case Book," a companion to the very widely-used DSM-IV diagnostic manual of mental disorders.

If you do this, there are several things to keep in mind. Remember that the case study you read is usually a synopsis of all the patient's worst symptoms. What most of their friends and co-workers saw (and thus what your players should see) were usually little things, odd stresses and abnormalities of behavior.

Many people with mental illnesses (particularly the mood disorders) learn to hide their symptoms. While they may or may not realize that their behavior is in any way bizarre or bad, they do realize that people don't like it. When others react badly every time they act sad and depressed, then they swiftly learn to put on a smile no matter how badly they feel inside. This behavior can become so ingrained that it can literally take years for a patient to become comfortable enough around a psychologist to display his symptoms.

Also remember that truth is often stranger than fiction — and this is for a reason. Things that happen in real life may sound absurd if you turn them into fiction. You may wish to tone down symptoms in order to keep them from appearing ridiculous. Remember that subtlety is one of your best tools when working with madness in a roleplaying game. Some of the most memorable madmen are those whose madnesses are only revealed over time through subtle clues and hints. Start off small and build up the insanity gradually. If anyone laughs or giggles then back off again.

Anti-Heroes and Red Herrings

Marauders and Nephandi may occupy any number of roles in your chronicle. They don't need to be traditional villains. They may be anti-heroes, red herrings present only to distract the player characters, sympathetic villains, or noble people whose charitable aims are thwarted by the wicked player characters.

It's all a matter of point of view. The players see their characters as the stars of the story. They're the main characters. They're probably, at least on some level, the "good guys." Turn that around. Make a Storyteller character the main character of the plot, and the player characters the "villains" or helpers. Or let your Storyteller character be a villain, but a likeable one, with which the cabal's members can't help but get along. Perhaps they meet him under amiable circumstances some time before they find out he's their opponent. He still likes them, and maybe they can't help but like him, yet they're on opposite sides.

As long as there's enough for the characters to do, and as long as the players feel they're capable of having an impact on the plot, they'll probably get a kick out of the fresh perspective. Remember that you don't need to be the main character in a story in order to have an effect on it. You don't need to be the hero in order to have something to do.

These are important things to keep in mind, too. More than one enthusiastic and well-meaning Storyteller has forgotten to leave room for the characters in a plot, and that isn't fun for anyone.

Noble Aims and Wicked Player Characters

Try to look at things from the bad guy's point of view. Most people have reasons for the things they do. Give your villain particularly good reasons for what he does. Give him unshakeable faith in his course of action. Allow him the luxury of knowing that he's right.

Then set your players' characters up in opposition to our noble villain. For one reason or another they believe they must stop him. They know that what he does is wicked and terrible. But that doesn't stop our villain from knowing that *he's right*, that his goals are righteous and worthy.

After all, plenty of people start out with good intentions and slip somewhere along the line. Perhaps he decided that the ends justified the means

(one of the most common ways to carry out this plot) and has perpetrated terrible crimes in the name of righteousness.

This may set the cabal up in some very interesting situations. They may feel it necessary to protect someone from the villain's machinations, even if that person could be said to "deserve" it. How would they feel about protecting a murderer, a rapist, an abuser? Would they turn her over in a moment of weakness? Would they want her to be brought to justice the legal way? All sorts of moral quandaries arise from such gray areas.

Some situations are not so gray. The Nephandus who believes that the only way to rid the world of bad people is to kill everyone is unlikely to get much help from the cabal. The Marauder whose delusions lead her to think that an innocent person requires killing obviously doesn't know what she's talking about. They can still make for interesting plots, however. What do you do about an enemy who doesn't really know what she's doing, or who thinks she's doing it for what *would* be a perfectly good reason, if she were correct?

Playing with villains who have noble aims can be an interesting way to divide the characters' contacts and friends. Some of them may come down on the villain's side of things. What do you do when someone you trust tells you to leave the bad guy alone? Or when someone threatens to cut off your access to something you need if you attack the villain?

This is one way to complicate what would otherwise be fairly straightforward plots. A little confusion about the "villain's" motives can throw everything off.

Anti-Heroes

An anti-hero is a "main character" that lacks one or more of the attributes we associate with a traditional hero. He lacks courage, grace or honesty, or he possesses some other "personality defect." He is confused and weak, often morally speaking. He may betray the people he cares about for selfish aims. He falls to temptation. He flees battle. And yet, we want him to succeed despite all this.

Nephandi and Marauders make wonderful anti-heroes. They started out as fairly normal people. In a lot of ways some still are normal people. They just don't have the moral fiber required to resist temptation. This might be the Nephandus who started out with good intentions, but couldn't help but succumb to the lure of power the Nephandi offered him. This is the Marauder who tries to resist the crazed whisperings of her Avatar, but cannot hold out against frustration, fear or temptation.

One might pity these people, but it's hard to hate them. They look too much like us for that. They should remind the players of what could happen to their characters if they ever let their guard down, even for a moment, and gave in to the wrong desires.

If you want to stress the similarity a little, subtly play up your anti-hero's similarity to one or more of the characters. Give him an aspect of background, interests, or profession reminiscent of someone in the party. Preferably, allow your characters (particularly any ones who have similarity to the anti-hero) to meet him under good circumstances.

Maybe the anti-hero even seems a likely candidate for membership in the cabal. He has some of the traits that could make him a hero, but a couple of questionable habits too. Nothing awful, but it looks bad in retrospect: a drinking problem, a gambling problem, or any other indication of weak willpower or selfish aims. Then he does something terrible and almost entirely unexpected. Maybe he lies about the characters in order to get ahead in something, or he betrays them in order to gain something from a villain.

The point is, he's basically a good guy, but he can't help giving in to his desires. He lacks a certain moral fiber that the players and their characters thought he had.

Remember in all of this that anti-heroes are meant to be main characters. This is another place where you can play with point of view. Put your anti-hero on a quest, where he is meant to somehow overcome one or more of his faults in order to do something heroic. But he can only do it with the help of the players' characters, who possess some of the moral fortitude he lacks. Again, the players have the capability and opportunity to affect the plot and aren't simple bystanders, but neither are they the main characters.

The quest of the anti-hero is usually meant to teach him something about himself and to make him just a little bit stronger. It can end in tragedy as well. Rarely does it result in him throwing wholesale on to the bad side of things. He is still a caring person at heart; even if he does bad things, he ultimately doesn't enjoy it.

Sympathetic Villains

The sympathetic villain is, at her heart, a bad guy. She just happens to be a likeable bad guy. Maybe her personality makes it hard to dislike her. She could be chatty and amiable, able to intelligently discuss a myriad of subjects in multiple languages. She might be an average person who likes sports and can drink the characters under the table.

Alternatively, her aims may seem noble. This is sometimes distinguishable from the aforementioned noble-aimed villain who is fighting wicked characters because her aims seem noble even to the characters (although the definition of the sympathetic villain and the noble-aimed villain may indeed overlap). That doesn't mean, though, that they feel they can let her get away with whatever it is she's doing.

For whatever reason, the characters like her, or at least sympathize with her. They probably met her under good circumstances. Or maybe they've just spent enough time sparring with her on various small plots and trading insults and jibes that they've developed something of a friendly rivalry with her. Perhaps they were present when the horrible tragedy that turned her to evil happened, and thus feel that they can't really judge her for what she does.

An anti-hero may become a sympathetic villain under the wrong circumstances. Either someone led her too far down that slippery slope, or something so terrible happened to her or someone she loved that she stepped over that line herself.

One way to create a sympathetic villain is to start with someone whose tragedy the players' characters have personally witnessed. Maybe they couldn't stop a villain in time before he killed her family, and she's the only one they were able to rescue. Perhaps something they did to stop a villain caused, as a side effect, something terrible to happen to her. The characters will be very surprised to see her come back later on the other side of things. They may have a very difficult time doing anything bad to her, too, particularly if they were, directly or indirectly, responsible for her tragedy.

It all depends on what sort of a mood you're going for. The sympathetic villain created by the cabal may establish a mood of hopelessness and helplessness. After all, either way they lose. Either they allow her to go on doing bad things, in which case those bad things could be called their fault, or they deal with her, in which case they're heaping insult on top of injury.

If you want a light-hearted long-running rivalry between the cabal and a particularly clever opponent, you can work with the villain who is simply too much

fun to dislike. In the movies this usually takes the form of the roguish thief who charms everyone while pilfering their gold necklaces and rings. If you want it to last for any time then don't let your villain pull off horrifying atrocities; stick with relatively low-level stuff in which people usually don't get hurt or killed. Later on you might up the stakes, forcing the players to decide whether to take stronger action against their characters' friend/foe.

Red Herrings

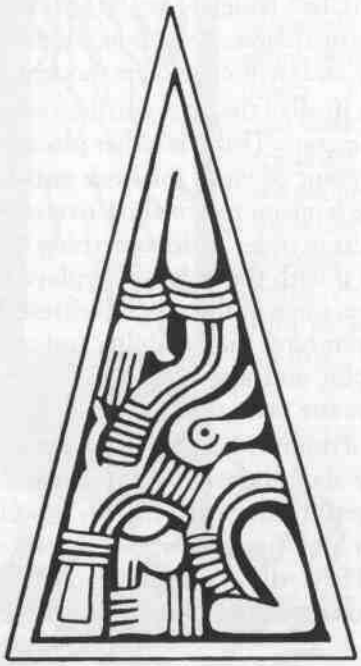
Marauders and Nephandi make wonderful distractions. When mages find out one of them was spotted anywhere near a crime or atrocity they're likely to assume the Marauder or Nephandus was responsible, and your players probably aren't much different.

Why not find out for yourself? Throw one of these oddities into the mix of a plot and watch everyone scramble to pin things on them. You shouldn't even need to plant lots of evidence implicating them. Often just their presence is enough.

Perhaps your villain is smart enough to use this form of prejudice against the characters deliberately. For some reason, he knows a Marauder will be in a certain place at a certain time, and he times his actions to coincide with that. Imagine the characters questioning all the witnesses to a crime, and realizing that one of them isn't behaving quite right. They do some additional digging and eventually come to the conclusion that he's a Marauder. Will they decide to stop there? Have they found their culprit, or do they keep an open mind?

What will the characters do if, through an investigation into an incident, they uncover the presence of a Nephandus, but the Nephandus turns out not to have done anything they can find out about? He certainly didn't commit the crime they're looking into. What do they do? Do they kill him simply for belonging to a bad group of people? Do they let him loose to commit his own atrocities later?

Remember that even Nephandi and Marauders used as simple red herrings should be complete, complex characters. Those that aren't will seem flat and stale, and this may give away the fact that they aren't important characters. Besides, if you give them plenty of personality and plots you may be able to use them later, when the next plot comes along. Today's red herring may be tomorrow's anti-hero or sympathetic villain.



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What is the Onyx Path?

Winter 2011-2012: (VtM) V20 Companion

Spring 2012: (VtM) Children of the Revolution

Summer 2012: (VtM) Hunters Hunted 2

Fall 2012: (WtA) Werewolf: The Apocalypse – 20th Anniversary Edition

Winter 2012-2013: (MtA) Mage Convention Book

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And from deceit, truth

Here at last, a revised and updated look at the *other* major factions of **Mage** conflict: The crazed Marauders whose fragmented Avatars give them insane visions of magic gone awry; the terrifying Nephandi who hope to end the miscegenated cosmos in bleak, utter nothingness; and the cryptic spirit hosts that serve needs and places humans have never imagined. All expanded and ready to include in your chronicle.

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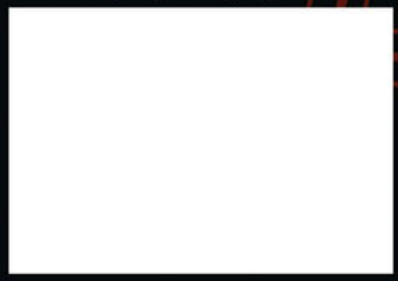

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